

Editorial

From Congo to Copenhagen

In the village of Kifuka, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), approximately 160 bolts of lightning strike in every square kilometer each year – the highest concentration of lightning strikes anywhere in the world (Figure 1). This, the greatest long-running natural show of magnificent fireworks on Earth, is not Congo's only claim to climatic fame. The country harbors the second largest rain forest in the world, after the Amazon in South America. The Congo River also spans the second largest watershed dominated by rivers in the world. Blessed with these natural resources, DRC's role in negotiations about abrupt climate change and mitigation strategies is of global significance. But with more than 66 million people and a gross domestic product of less than \$200 per capita, it is doubtful that DRC's voice will be heard loudly in the upcoming 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) being held in Copenhagen (7 – 18 December 2009). That is, unless powerful new data and activist coalitions converge to amplify the voices of the vulnerable and the threatened.

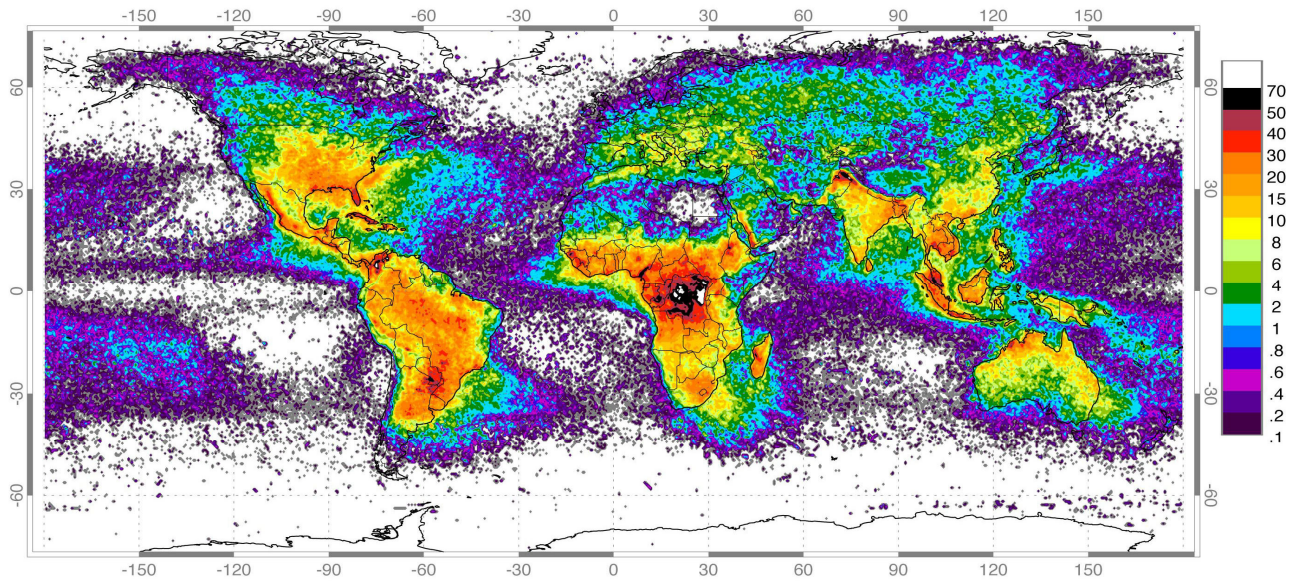
Some models of climate change predict that the frequency of lightning will likely increase in places like Kifuka, if greenhouse gases continue to increase in the atmosphere at current rates. Were lightning and thunder easy to capture and store as sources of energy, we can be sure that “developers” and “technology transfer experts” will have been all over DRC. Instead, the resources that are generating concern are the timber one side for economic prosperity with the potential to marginalize the welfare of indigenous populations, and the integrity of the forest ecosystem on the other side, with the potential to help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

Congo is prominent on the agenda of COP15 largely because of the controversial program called “REDD” – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (The United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries <http://www.un-redd.org/>)(COP15 UNFCCC Side-Event - OFAC: "REDD issues in the Congo Basin: towards an operational Observatory", Copenhagen, Denmark. http://www.cbfp.org/events_en/events/OFAC-Side-event-COP15-E.html). The Congo basin's tropical rainforest is disappearing at a rate of 0.15% annually, but this rate is predicted to increase – even though activists routinely ward off ill-conceived international projects that directly compromise the integrity of the forest through questionable land-use schemes and industrial development initiatives (see REDD Myths(Friends of the Earth, International. REDD Myths: a critical review of proposed mechanisms to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation in developing countries.<http://www.landcoalition.org/cpl-blog/wp-content/uploads/redd-myths.pdf> }). Oppositions to the REDD scheme have emerged at the grassroots level in many countries that host the world's major forests. Among the criticisms is alleged lack of consultation with indigenous populations by the World Bank and its partners in establishing the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. Amid charges of neo-colonialism, thinly disguised as financial aid, foreign responsibility for local resources is asserted through the concern that their depletion has serious ramifications for global climate. Reputably, the REDD model includes estimates of the profitable dimensions of selective forest depletion (Computer model predicts future deforestation in Congo Basin rainforest applied systems analysis, Central African countries, climate summit, soil composition. <http://trak.in/news/computer-model-predicts-future-deforestation-in-congo-basin-rainforest/26098/#ixzz0XuHi1UOX>).

In DRC, a proposal to zone more than half a million square kilometers of forests for industrial logging activities engendered sufficient angst to provoke a formal response from the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Council (IPACC), a network of more than 155 indigenous peoples' organizations in 22 African countries (<http://www.ipacc.org.za/eng/default.asp>). Representatives of IPACC have participated in REDD negotiations, and they will be at COP15. A video file entitled *Protecting Africa's Forests: Indigenous Peoples Tackle Climate Change* can be viewed at the IPACC website, with the narrator extolling the benefits of REDD because the program promises to transfer billions of dollars to indigenous economies through carbon trading as a mechanism to forestall deforestation. Indigenous forest guardians are being taught to “see” trees as pillars of carbon – instead of immediate life-support

systems. The people's responsibility is to keep these pillars standing in order to earn dollars. This can work if there are meaningful ways invested in the communities to spend the dollars earned. Otherwise, this program could be a very leaky "band aid" on a festering sore.

A.



High Resolution Full Climatology Annual Flash Rate

Global distribution of lightning April 1995-February 2003 from the combined observations of the NASA OTD (4/95-3/00) and LIS (1/98-2/03) instruments

B.



C.



Figure 1. The Congo Basin experiences the highest number of lightning per area in the world (Panels A and B). The Congo's lush rainforest (Panel C) is also the site of controversial negotiations on forest management in the context of climate change.
http://thunder.nsstc.nasa.gov/images/HRFC_AnnualFlashRate_cap.jpg, and
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/Dem_congo_sat.jpg

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