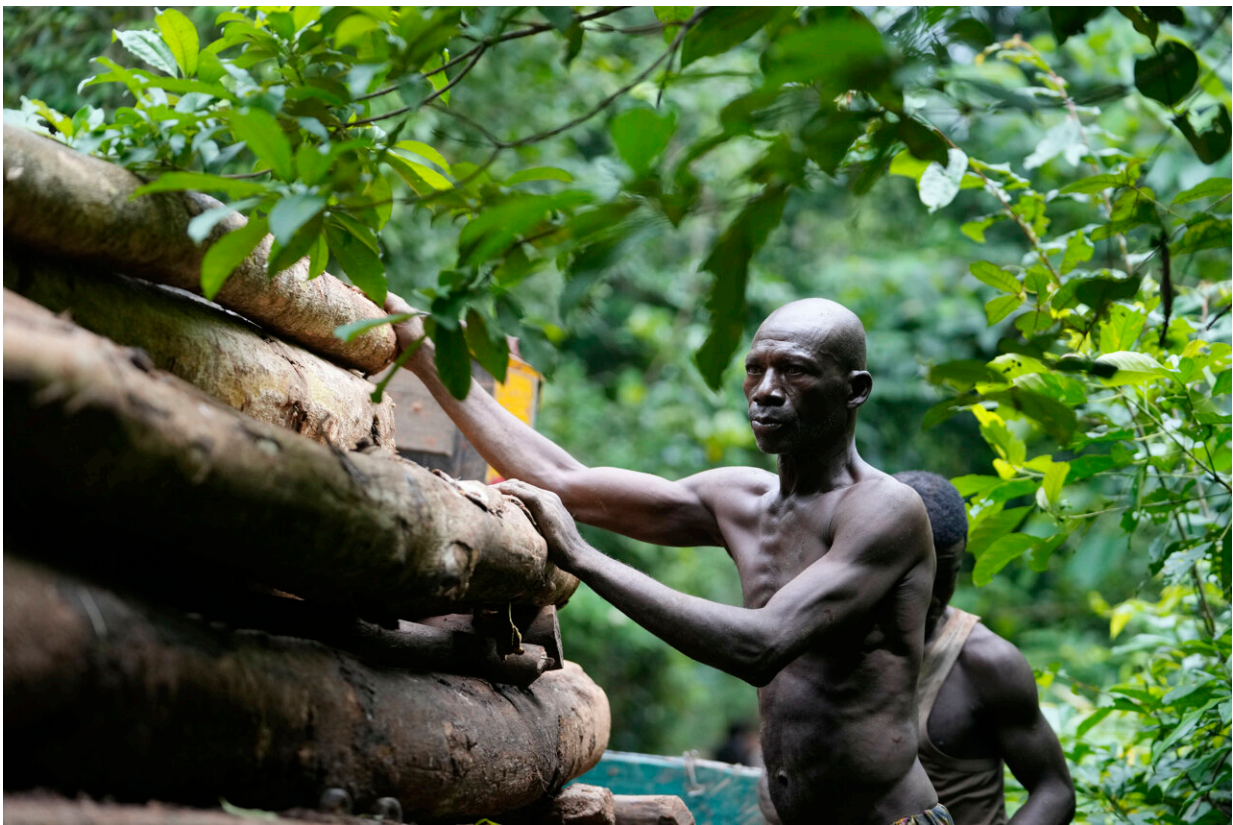


Logging is growing in a Nigerian forest home to endangered elephants. Rangers blame lax enforcement

August 30 2023, by Taiwo Adebayo



A bare-chested man loads timber onto a truck inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Monday, July 31, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

Roaring chainsaws sent trees crashing to the ground, and bare-chested men hacked away at the branches beside a muddy road. Others heaved logs onto a truck, where they were tied in place with wire.

The work was similar on the other side of the road, with a timber-laden truck coughing dark plumes of smoke as it pulled away. This was miles into the conservation zone of Omo Forest Reserve in southern Nigeria, a protected area where logging is prohibited because it's [home to threatened species like African elephants](#), pangolins and white-throated monkeys. But [forest](#) rangers, seeing the impunity, were hesitant to act.

"We see people we arrested and turned over to the government back in the forest, and they get emboldened," ranger Sunday Abiodun told The Associated Press during a recent trip to the reserve.

Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As [trees](#) become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching.

Conservationists and rangers blame the government for not enforcing [environmental regulations](#) or adequately replanting trees, impeding Nigeria's pledge under the Paris climate agreement to maintain places like forests that absorb carbon from the atmosphere.



Loggers cut trees and hack away at branches inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

The government of Nigeria's southwestern Ogun state, which owns the reserve, denied failing to enforce regulations. In a statement, it said it's replanting more trees than are being cut down.

The forest's gatekeepers and those processing the wood both dispute that assertion, insisting trees are disappearing.

Sawmillers get annual permits from the government to cut down trees until their designated area is completely deforested. Then they can apply for a new section. They say the permit fee of 2 million naira (\$2,645) is intended to cover the government's costs to replace trees but that this rarely occurs.

"The government is not replanting," said Owolabi Oguntimehin, a sawmiller in Ijebu, a nearby town that has over 50 sawmilling companies relying on the reserve. "It is not our responsibility to replant because the government collects the fee from us."



Loggers load timber onto a truck inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer

conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

Besides problems with replanting, authorities don't enforce tree removal standards, even when loggers get permits, according to forest guards, who are employed by the state government.

Joseph Olaonipekun, a guard, said officials from Ogun state's forestry department used to mark trees that could be cut and ensure "strict" enforcement to prevent others from being removed. But that's no longer done, he said.

"By implementing selective logging, the adverse effects on the biodiversity of an area can be minimized while also providing the opportunity for young trees to continue growing," Nigerian ecologist Babajide Agboola said. "This method allows for a more sustainable approach to logging and forest management."

Trees such as Cordia wood, mahogany and gmelina are disappearing from the forest's periphery, according to both sawmillers and reserve gatekeepers.



A logger wields a chainsaw to cut trees inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

"There has to be massive reforestation so that the conservation zone will not be dismantled," Agboola said.

But forest rangers hired by the nonprofit Nigerian Conservation Foundation, which is the government's partner in managing the conservation zone, have found it a challenge to protect against illegal logging in off-limits areas.

They say loggers harvesting trees in the conservation zone brag about bypassing regulations by paying off government officials.

"We want the government to support us in preserving the forest," ranger Johnson Adejain said. He echoed his colleagues in calling for strict enforcement and sanctions, "so that the loggers do not come back to continue their illegal acts and boast that with money they can avoid punishment."

The Nigerian economy, Africa's largest, heavily relies on agriculture, forestry and other land uses. These industries, which are responsible for 25% of Nigeria's greenhouse gas emissions, provide jobs for the majority of people in agrarian communities around the reserve.



Three rangers argue with illegal loggers near a truck carrying timber inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Conservationists and rangers blame the government for not enforcing environmental regulations or adequately replanting trees, impeding Nigeria's pledge under the Paris climate agreement to maintain places like forests that absorb carbon from the atmosphere. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

As a result, there is debate about the political will to enforce environmental sustainability when livelihoods are at stake.

That factor should be considered, said Wale Adedayo, chairman of the Ijebu East local government area where a significant part of the forest is located. He advocated for a reduction of the conservation zone to give more land to locals to farm and log.

But he also acknowledged that "there is a lot of deforestation" that should be reversed to ensure Nigeria's contribution to fighting climate change.

For its part, the state government said "it is incorrect" to blame the pressure to make a living "when loggers illegally find their way into the conservation area to steal parts of the conserved trees."

Adedayo said logging in protected areas "is not possible without the connivance of the civil servants."



A logger walks on timber piled on a truck inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

The government's forest guards have seen it first hand.

"There is too much corruption in this forest caused by greed and poverty," Olaonipekun said. "When we say, 'Don't go there,' some go through higher authorities to defy us, and we are helpless."

The government, meanwhile, has delayed formally declaring the

conservation area a [wildlife sanctuary](#) to protect it from threats like logging, farming and poaching, said Emmanuel Olabode, who manages the Nigerian Conservation Foundation's wildlife conservation project in the forest.

The foundation's rangers are focused on nearly 6.5 square kilometers of strictly protected land where elephants are believed to live and has been designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO.

"It is left to the government to enforce the regulations," said Olabode, who supervises the foundation's rangers.



Nigerian ecologist Babajide Agboola, photographed in the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023, says, "By implementing selective logging, the adverse effects on the biodiversity of an area can be minimized

while also providing the opportunity for young trees to continue growing."
Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba



Loggers transport timber inside the Omo Forest Reserve in Nigeria on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba



People look over timber, some of which came from the Omo Forest Reserve, to be sold at a market in Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2023.

Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba



Logs are milled into boards at sawmill in Ijebu Ode, Nigeria, on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023. Conservationists say the outer region of Omo Forest Reserve, where logging is allowed, is already heavily deforested. As trees become scarce, loggers are heading deep into the 550-square-kilometer conservation area, which is also under threat from uncontrolled cocoa farming and poaching. Credit: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba

Loggers even have resorted to violence to ensure their timber supply. Olabode recounted when assailants with assault rifles attacked a rangers' patrol base in 2021, and loggers just kept cutting trees.

"Our rangers escaped with injuries, and we notified the authorities, but nothing was done, and we have not gone back there due to security concerns," Olabode said, adding that the area is now unprotected.

The government says it plans to employ the military and police to combat illegal operators. It urges loggers who follow the rules to "fight their members who are into illegalities."

More information: This is the second in a series of stories from the Omo Forest Reserve. Read the first installment [here](#).

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