Sand dunes in Cameroon?

Archaeological findings suggest that the Sahara desert was once covered with lush vegetation and thick rainforest. Elephants and lions found their way through the moist surrounding. Natural processes, perhaps combined with human activities, changed this green landscape into a dry, sandy area where not much would grow and animals disappeared.

Could this happen to the rainforest of Central Africa? Is it possible that Cameroon might one day turn into a landscape of sand dunes? Be reassured, this is an unlikely scenario, at least not in the near future. But human activities, such as the clearing of forests and other woodlands have surely contributed to edging the way for the desert to enlarge its territory. The dryland ecosystems, which in Central Africa form the bridge between desert and forest, are more and more transformed into areas for human use, mostly agricultural activities. In many instances, this is because poverty has forced populations who are dependent on natural resources to turn to these marginal lands in order to sustain their livelihoods. Together with an increase in overexploitation, including overgrazing, this has led to the degradation of up to 20% of dryland ecosystems resulting in desertification and drought, the endangerment of several hundreds plant and animal species due to loss of their habitat, poor agricultural production, and a rise of social, economic and political tensions in some parts of Africa.

To focus attention on the urgency of the situation in drylands worldwide, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has chosen this year's theme of International Biodiversity Day (22 May) to be: Protect biodiversity in drylands. Equally significant, the theme for this year World Environment Day (5 June) will focus on drylands and desertification.

The processes of desertification and the associated loss of biodiversity in drylands can be halted or at least significantly reduced by introducing or re-introducing trees in these landscapes-activities commonly referred to as afforestation and reafforestation. By expanding the land areas covered by forests, the soil is better able to keep its moist and nutrients . Not only do forests protect the soil and constitute a reservoir of biodiversity, but they also provide means of livelihoods to the local communities through sustainable exploitation of timber as well as non timber forest products. Several studies conducted by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and many other organizations working on forestry issues have shown the varied and invaluable range of ecosystem goods and services that forests provide to mankind-especially the rural poor and many indigenous communities who depend on forests for their survival as it is the place where they get their food, shelter, medicines and many other values including those associated with their cultural and spiritual rites.

As the world focuses today on the need to protect drylands and their biodiversity, it is important that we reflect also on the vital role played by forests as our insurance against desertification. For a country such as Cameroon which borders the Sahel in its northern regions, the concept of "green belt" championed by Prof. Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan-born Nobel Peace Prize winner (2004) would make perfect common sense. In a country such as Cameroon which is still blessed with significant forest resources, the sad story of the Sahara- a once green landscape turned into a dry and sandy desert- should be a constant reminder that sustainable management of forests, whether dry or moist ones, is paramount.

A responsible management makes sure that not all land is cleared of wood. Moreover, it is also important to keep the focus on the fight against poverty in order to relieve the pressure that poor people exert on the marginal lands: a hungry stomach does not think about loss of biodiversity and desertification issues; a filled one might care more about the future.

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