

## Vicwood-Thantry destroying Cameroon's ancient forests

### Cameroon's Forest of the Great Apes

**"Logging as practised by this company puts in jeopardy the whole forestry policy and the sustainable management of our resources... this company is the most disorganised of all those visited."**

*MINEF, Cameroon's Environment and Forestry Ministry, December 1999 writing about Vicwood-Thantry subsidiary SEBC*

The lowland rainforest of Cameroon forms part of Africa's stunning Forest of the Great Apes. One of the world's last remaining strongholds of species such as lowland gorillas, chimpanzees and forest elephants, this forest supports countless species of plants and animals and is home to around 12 million forest-dependent people. But today their future is under threat, as illegal and destructive logging companies encroach deeper and deeper into this fragile forest.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years a number of official reports published by the Cameroonian government and the World Bank have revealed the dominant nature of illegal activities within Cameroon's logging industry<sup>2</sup> – activities that cost the government millions of dollars each year in lost revenue.<sup>3</sup> In the last three years, numerous timber companies have been fined for illegal practices such as tax evasion, logging outside legal boundaries, logging after permits have expired, cutting undersized trees and logging in unallocated concession areas.<sup>4</sup>



July 2001: new logging road in East Cameroon

One of the main factors driving this corrupt, destructive and economically inefficient industry is the demand from the international marketplace – the importing nations who choose to ignore what is going on in the forest and simply carry on with business as usual.

### Vicwood-Thantry: Cameroon's biggest logging company

The French-owned Thanry Group is one of the largest logging conglomerates in Africa, if not the largest.<sup>5</sup> Through its various subsidiaries, the group controls several million hectares of forest in Cameroon, Gabon, Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville and Guinea.

In 1997 the Hong Kong-based company Vicwood Pacific Ltd acquired the capital of Thanry-France, leaving the Cameroonian subsidiaries of Thanry under Vicwood's control.<sup>6</sup> However,

Throughout the world ancient forests are in crisis. Some 80% of the world's original ancient forest cover is already gone; illegal and destructive logging poses the single greatest threat to what remains.

The uncontrolled international trade in ancient forest products fuels this destruction. As part of its campaign to protect what is left of the world's ancient forests, Greenpeace is carrying out investigations into logging companies involved in illegal, destructive and abusive activities and is calling on consumers, trading partners and governments around the world to stop their role in driving this unscrupulous industry.



December 2001, UK – Vicwood-Thantry sapele at International Timber Company

**"A disastrous partnership of loggers and hunters in the Congo basin ... [means that] in as little as ten years... the world's second-biggest tropical forest could be emptied of large mammals; and Africa's great apes – gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos – could become extinct."** *The Economist*, 12 January 2002

the companies continue to be known in Cameroon as 'Thanry', 'Thanry-Vicwood' or 'Vicwood-Thantry'.<sup>7</sup>

Like other logging companies in Cameroon, Vicwood-Thantry companies have established an infamous reputation for violating forestry laws, creating social conflicts and causing massive environmental damage. Since March 2000, Vicwood-Thantry companies have been fined well over one billion Central African Francs (US\$1.3 million).

### Company profiles

Vicwood-Thantry-controlled logging companies in Cameroon together constitute the country's largest producer of logs and sawn wood:<sup>8</sup> they control some 800,000ha of forest, and run six sawmills with a total annual processing capacity of approximately 320,000m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Companies within Vicwood-Thantry<sup>10</sup> and related companies in Cameroon

Company	Activities
Compagnie Forestière du Cameroun (CFC)	In March 1996 CFC obtained four concessions (totalling some 200,000ha). <sup>11</sup>
Société d'Exploitation des Bois du Cameroun (SEBC)	SEBC operates two large concessions totalling 174,330ha and a sawmill in Lokomo with an annual capacity of 110,000m <sup>3</sup> . The company's current address is the same as Vicwood-Thantry's. <sup>12</sup>
Société Africaine des Bois (SAB)	SAB's concession of 60,838ha supplies the SAB sawmill (annual capacity 35,000m <sup>3</sup> ) in Yaoundé. <sup>13</sup>
Compagnie Industrielle du Bois au Cameroun (CIBC)	In 1994 CIBC received a logging title (licence) for 87,540ha. CIBC's sawmill in Gribi has an annual capacity of 55,000m <sup>3</sup> . <sup>14</sup>
Société Camerounaise pour la Transformation des Produits des Palmiers (Propalm Bois)	Based in Eséka, Propalm operates a 125,490ha concession <sup>15</sup> and a sawmill (annual capacity 40,000m <sup>3</sup> ) in Douala. <sup>16</sup>
J. Prenant	Holds a 54,447ha concession in the East Province. <sup>17</sup>
Kieffer	Widely known to be associated with Thanry via J. Prenant. <sup>18</sup> Kieffer won a 51,685ha concession in the East Province in July 2002. <sup>19</sup>
Société Africaine de Grumes (Afrigrum)	Despite being disqualified from participating in the 2000 public auction for concession allocation, Afrigrum nevertheless gained control of a short-term logging permit that year. <sup>20</sup>
ETMC/Afrique Bois	Holds a 155,421ha concession in the East Province. <sup>21</sup>



September 2001, La Rochelle, France – logs from Vicwood-Thantry



Summer 2000, Germany – Europe accounts for more than half of Cameroon's timber exports

**"SEBC illegally logs an area where they do not have permission. After the refusal of the director of SEBC to implement all measures agreed upon, we have blockaded the private road of SEBC."**

*Villagers of Atsjek, 1993 (in a letter to the President of Cameroon and the Governor of the East Province)<sup>22</sup>*

### Environmental destruction and social conflict

With the majority of its operations located in forest areas of high conservation value, and with some of its concessions adjacent to protected areas, the Vicwood-Thantry group of companies disrupts the livelihoods of thousands of indigenous people and is destroying the habitat of the forest's endangered mammal species.<sup>23</sup>

Numerous forest-dependent communities, including the Baka 'pygmies', inhabit the areas in which Vicwood-Thantry operates.<sup>24</sup> The companies within the Vicwood-Thantry group have created serious social conflicts in several of their logging operations.

In January 1993, angry villagers of Atsjek village blockaded SEBC's logging trucks, protesting at the company's failure to live up to its agreements with them – including an undertaking to provide adequate compensation for damage caused by the company. This developed into a major social conflict that has been described as “probably the first time in African history that such significant protest against a logging company by local people had taken place”.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere, villagers in the region of Vicwood-Thanyry's CFC sawmill at Ngolla have reported that since the beginning of the company's logging activities, game, fish and fruit trees have become scarce, jeopardising local communities' food supply.<sup>26</sup>

But the social problems caused by the companies do not stop there. In April 2000, a social and environmental impact study of CFC conducted by several NGOs together with the Cameroonian Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF) revealed numerous abuses of the company's own workforce, including failure to provide even a source of drinking water.<sup>27</sup>

### Vicwood-Thanyry and the bushmeat trade

The poaching of bushmeat – including endangered species such as chimpanzees, forest elephants and gorillas – is widespread in Cameroon, and is particularly common where logging roads open up previously inaccessible forest. To some extent the meat is used to feed the loggers, but much of it is taken out – usually on logging trucks – to sell on the black market in Cameroon's cities.<sup>28</sup>

The role of Vicwood-Thanyry companies in the illegal bushmeat trade has been documented by the World Society for the Protection of Animals and the German Development Agency GTZ,<sup>29</sup> with evidence of bushmeat poaching recently found in concessions operated by SAB,<sup>30</sup> CFC<sup>31</sup> and SEBC.<sup>32</sup> There are reports of regular transport of bushmeat and elephant tusks out of the forest on logging trucks.<sup>33</sup> During a survey in 1998, GTZ identified no less than 25 illegally held guns in SEBC's Lokomo concession.<sup>34</sup>

### Illegal logging

Since the implementation of Cameroon's log export ban in 1999,<sup>35</sup> the World Bank has discovered that the origin of some logs has been falsified in order to get round the new legislation: Cameroonian logs have been falsely marked as originating in the neighbouring Central African Republic so as to avoid export controls.<sup>36</sup> Vicwood-Thanyry timber has adjacent concessions in the two countries.<sup>37</sup> Thanry's holdings in the Central African Republic lie within a few kilometres of CFC's concessions in Cameroon.

Vicwood-Thanyry has recently associated itself with a logging company controlled by the Central African Republic's president, thereby obtaining access to a huge forest concession (more than 650,000ha). *Marchés Tropicaux*, the weekly trade journal, mentions this as a cause for concern because the company “does not have a reputation for respecting sustainable forest management plans... a cause for slight unease for all those who were celebrating the advances made by Central Africa”.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, in Cameroon itself, the Vicwood-Thanyry companies have been repeatedly fined for “anarchic logging” – including the cutting of undersized trees, logging outside legal boundaries and logging in unallocated concessions.



November 2001, Tilbury, UK – Vicwood-Thanyry timber imported by trader NHG for UK timber supplier Brooks Bros



“Up to three-quarters of this low-access forest in Cameroon is at risk from hunters, who travel up new logging roads to empty previously inaccessible areas of their wildlife.”

*Global Forest Watch, Overview of logging in Cameroon, 2000*

Table 2: Some of Vicwood-Thantry's recent illegal logging activities

UFA (Forest Management Area)	Illegalities
10-001 to 10-004 (CFC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• November 1998: MINEF seized 268m<sup>3</sup> of wood cut by CFC/SEBC in the heart of the – at that time unallocated – UFA 00-003.<sup>39</sup></li> <li>• March 2000: CFC fined CFA 11 million (US\$14,700) for systematically cutting undersized trees, especially sapele, and non-demarcation of allocated cutblock boundaries.<sup>40</sup></li> <li>• June 2000: CFC fined CFA 3 million (US\$4,000) plus CFA 160 million (US\$213,300) damages for exploitation beyond the boundaries of the allowed cutblock.<sup>41</sup></li> <li>• June 2001: CFC fined CFA 108 million (US\$144,000) for logging outside cutblock boundaries.<sup>42</sup></li> </ul>
10-007 (SEBC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• March 2000: SEBC fined CFA 20 million (US\$26,700) and operations suspended for three months for “anarchic logging” and logging without a title.<sup>43</sup></li> <li>• June 2001: SEBC fined CFA 288 million (US\$384,000) for illegal logging in neighbouring UFA 10-008.<sup>44</sup></li> </ul>
10-011 (SAB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• March 2000: SAB fined CFA 10 million (US\$13,300) and barred from the next round of UFA auctions for “anarchic exploitation without the least respect for the notion of a cutblock, and exploitation of undersized trees of certain species”.<sup>45</sup></li> <li>• June 2000: SAB fined a further CFA 10 million (US\$13,300) plus damages of CFA 433 million (US\$577,300) for exploitation outside the concession.<sup>46</sup></li> <li>• June 2001: SAB fined CFA 178 million (US\$237,300) for logging outside cutblock boundaries.<sup>47</sup></li> </ul>
10-015 (ETMC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the MINEF inspection in 1999 no sign of ETMC was to be found, either in the field or in the office.<sup>48</sup> MINEF initially annulled the company's UFA but this annulment was later revoked.<sup>49</sup></li> </ul>
10-037 (Kieffer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• October 2001: Kieffer fined CFA 3 million (US\$4,000) for failing to respect forestry regulations.<sup>50</sup></li> </ul>
10-045 (J. Prenant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 1998, a MINEF control mission found J. Prenant illegally logging in three UFAs (10-030, 10-042 and 10-044).<sup>51</sup></li> </ul>
10-058 (SEBC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• March 2000: SEBC suspended from operation for three months by MINEF for anarchic exploitation in the UFA, illicit logging outside the UFA, and undersized felling both within and outside the UFA.<sup>52</sup></li> </ul>

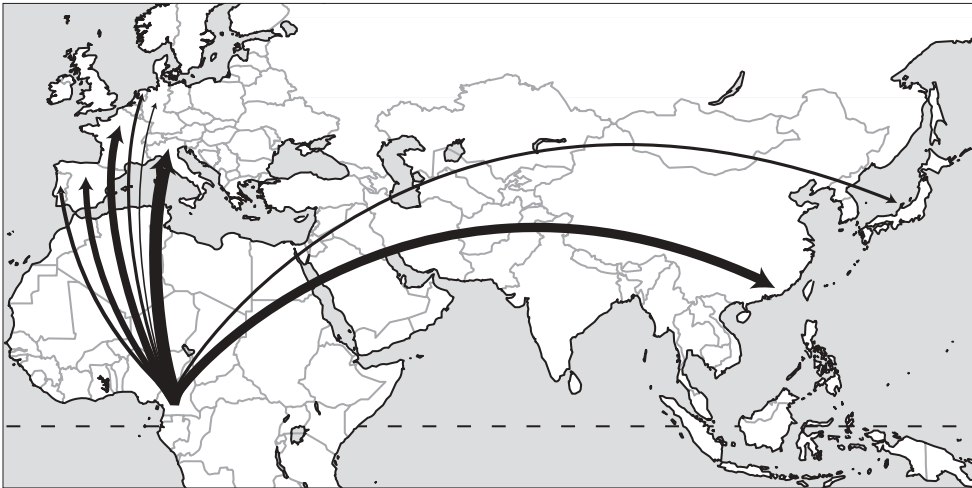


September 2001, La Rochelle, France – SEBC sawn timber; this Vicwood-Thantry subsidiary has alone been fined hundreds of thousands of dollars for illegal activities

Since March 2000, Vicwood-Thantry companies have been fined well over one billion Central African Francs (US\$1.3 million). Meanwhile, as importing nations and companies persistently ignore the group's appalling record, their logs and timber continue to flood the international market. In practice, therefore, the Cameroonian government and the international donor community continue to allow Vicwood-Thantry to profit from illegal and destructive forest activities.

### European imports driving destruction

French and other European logging companies traditionally dominated the logging industry in Central Africa's forests, which once stretched across the continent from Senegal to Uganda.<sup>53</sup> But with the extensive depletion of the rainforests in West Africa (especially the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria), coupled with growing world demand for tropical timber, many logging companies – not only from Europe but also from elsewhere – have intensified their activities in the ancient forests of Cameroon.



The international market for Cameroon's timber

As industrial logging has continued to expand into the last intact ancient forests of East Cameroon, Europe has remained a strong factor driving both the industry and the destruction of Cameroon's remaining rainforests. While sources on trade data vary considerably, recent figures show that the EU is currently responsible for a minimum of 52% of Cameroon's annual exports.<sup>54/55</sup> In recent years China has emerged as a rapidly growing market and Vicwood-Thantry in particular is exporting significant timber volumes to China.<sup>56</sup>

Despite a series of Greenpeace actions in July 2000, highlighting the illegal and destructive activities of Vicwood-Thantry and other companies involved in the international timber trade, significant volumes of the group's logs and timber have recently been located in Belgium, Germany,<sup>57</sup> the UK<sup>58</sup> and Italy.<sup>59</sup>

One important buyer of Vicwood-Thantry's timber in Europe is the Danish multinational DLH Nordisk.<sup>60</sup> Listed on the Copenhagen Stock Exchange, DLH Nordisk has offices in 24 countries worldwide, making it one of the world's largest international timber traders. Its major markets are the US, Denmark and France, with Europe accounting for around two-thirds of all DLH sales.<sup>61</sup> Ironically, DLH's annual report for 2000 claims: "The aim of the environmental policy implemented by DLH is to promote sustainable forestry. Suppliers are thus carefully selected with this in mind."<sup>62</sup>

Companies buying from DLH Nordisk should therefore be aware that they could also be buying from Vicwood-Thantry. Additional companies known to be buying logs and timber from the group include the UK timber traders NHG and James Latham, the Italian trader San Giorgi and the German sawmill and trader W.O. Bührich/ Freudenberg.



November 2001, London UK – Vicwood-Thantry sapele imported by DLH at UK timber merchant James Latham



Cameroon's logging industry is dominated by illegalities – to the cost of the forest

## Greenpeace call for action

Vicwood-Thantry's logging companies have been implicated in illegal and destructive logging and their role in causing social conflict has been exposed. Greenpeace is urging governments of all importing countries to bring an immediate end to their role in the destruction of Cameroon's forests by committing to the following actions:

- **stop the destruction**  
by stopping any further industrial activities in intact ancient forest until responsible plans for forest conservation and sustainable use have been agreed.
- **clean up the timber trade**  
by ensuring that timber is produced and traded in a legal and ecologically responsible way; by refusing to trade with companies known to be operating illegally or destructively; and by demanding that all wood and wood products entering national ports must come from legal and well-managed forest operations according to high social and ecological standards.<sup>63</sup>
- **come up with the money**  
by providing funds to pay for forest conservation and sustainable development.



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Sizer and Plouvier (2000).
- <sup>2</sup> MINEF (1999a, 1999b); Milol and Pierre (2000); Durrieu de Madron and Ngaha (2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Milol and Pierre (2000).
- <sup>4</sup> MINEF (2000a, 2001); Faure and Njampiep (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens (1999a) refers to Thanry as the "numéro un du bois en Afrique".
- <sup>6</sup> When Vicwood took over the entire capital of Thanry-France (Thanry-France 1997), Thanry apparently agreed that, for the purposes of marketing timber in Europe, Vicwood could continue to use the Thanry brand name for an unspecified period of time (see Forests Monitor 2001). The Vicwood name rarely appears in Thanry's own publicity materials, and logging companies in Cameroon now controlled by Vicwood continue to be presented as belonging to the 'Groupe Thanry Cameroun et Centrafrique' (cf. Thanry advertisement in Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens 1999b).
- <sup>7</sup> MINEF (1999a) for example describes SAB & SEBC as "Thanry" while Durrieu de Madron and Ngaha (2000) describe the same companies as belonging to the "Groupe Thanry-Vicwood".
- <sup>8</sup> In 1999 just one of Thanry's subsidiaries – SEBC – controlled 18.7% of the country's log market and 18% of the market in sawn wood. Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens (1999b).
- <sup>9</sup> Moreover, the official holdings give only an approximation of the extent of the group's control of the Cameroonian forest, and it is likely that it exercises additional de facto control over other companies. Source: Carret (1999).
- <sup>10</sup> A 1999 advertisement (in Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens 1999b) clearly designates "Groupe Thanry Cameroun et Centrafrique" as comprising SEBC, SAB, J. Prenant, Propalm Bois, CIBC, CFC, TC and Sofokad. TC and Sofokad are Thanry's Central African subsidiaries.
- <sup>11</sup> CFC obtained four concessions through a

presidential decree signed by the Prime Minister in March 1996. This was in clear violation of the country's new forestry legislation, which requires a public and competitive allocation process to grant new concessions (see Cameroon Government 1995).

- <sup>12</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2001a).
- <sup>13</sup> Carret (1999).
- <sup>14</sup> Carret (1999).
- <sup>15</sup> Interministerial Commission for Concession Allocation (2000).
- <sup>16</sup> Carret (1999).
- <sup>17</sup> Interministerial Commission for Concession Allocation (2000).
- <sup>18</sup> Collomb and Bikié (2001) and pers. comm from various anonymous sources to Greenpeace.
- <sup>19</sup> Interministerial Commission for Concession Allocation (2000). Kieffer had one of the lowest technical scores – i.e. the least attractive bid environmentally or financially – of any firm participating in the July 2000 auction for concession allocation.
- <sup>20</sup> Collomb and Bikié (2001). Sources in industry and MINEF indicate that SAB (Vicwood–Thanry) is a partner of Afrigrum.
- <sup>21</sup> Collomb and Bikié (2001) links ETMC with Thanry.
- <sup>22</sup> Cited in Verhagen et al. (1993).
- <sup>23</sup> SAB's Forest Management Unit UFA 10-011, borders the Lobéké Park; ETMC's UFA 10-015 borders the proposed park of Boumba Bek.
- <sup>24</sup> Verhagen et al. (1993).
- <sup>25</sup> Verhagen et al. (1993).
- <sup>26</sup> Djomo et al. (2000).
- <sup>27</sup> Djomo et al. (2000).
- <sup>28</sup> Pearce and Ammann (1995).
- <sup>29</sup> Pearce and Ammann (1995); Ndo Nkoumou and Heinze (1999).
- <sup>30</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000a).
- <sup>31</sup> Djomo et al. (2000).
- <sup>32</sup> Zouya-Mimbang (1998); Ndo Nkoumou and Heinze (1999).
- <sup>33</sup> Zouya-Mimbang (1998).
- <sup>34</sup> Ndo Nkoumou and Heinze (1999).
- <sup>35</sup> As of June 1999, Cameroonian law banned the export of raw logs of most timber species, including sipo, sapele and the CITES-listed species afrormosia.
- <sup>36</sup> World Bank (2000).
- <sup>37</sup> Forests Monitor (2001).
- <sup>38</sup> Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens (2002).
- <sup>39</sup> MINEF (1998).
- <sup>40</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000b).
- <sup>41</sup> MINEF (2000b).
- <sup>42</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000c).
- <sup>43</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000b).
- <sup>44</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000c).
- <sup>45</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000b).
- <sup>46</sup> MINEF (2000b).
- <sup>47</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000c).
- <sup>48</sup> MINEF (1999a).
- <sup>49</sup> In July 2000 ETMC's convention provisoire was annulled "purely and simply", according to MINEF's avis d'appel d'offres pour l'attribution des concessions forestières published in the Cameroon Tribune of 12 July 2000 (Cameroon Tribune 2000d). But this annulment, which was to take effect immediately, seems itself to have been annulled: MINEF's official list of valid logging titles as of 30 November 2000 indicates that ETMC has been granted a "moratorium".
- <sup>50</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2001b).
- <sup>51</sup> Durrieu de Madron and Ngaha (2000).
- <sup>52</sup> Cameroon Tribune (2000b).
- <sup>53</sup> See sources (Van Dorp 1995; Debroux and Karsenty 1998) cited in Greenpeace International (1999).
- <sup>54</sup> Figures cited vary from 52% (International Tropical Timber Organisation 2000) to 83% (Forests Monitor 2001).
- <sup>55</sup> Based on these conservative data, the most significant EU importer is Italy (19.9%), followed by Spain (14%), France (9.8%) and Portugal (5.6%). Additional markets include Germany, The Netherlands and UK (Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens, May 2000 – cited in Forests Monitor 2001).
- <sup>56</sup> Forests Monitor (2001).

<sup>57</sup> In mid-2001 at the sawmill of W.O. Bührich/Freudenberg (Hamburg), and early 2002 at Nordenham (cargo of MV Sun Admiral).

<sup>58</sup> SEBC wood at Tilbury docks, late 2001.

<sup>59</sup> J. Prenant, SEBC and SAB sawn wood at Ravenna docks, mid-2001.

<sup>60</sup> Greenpeace research. DLH Nordisk is the hardwood division of Denmark's DLH (Dalhoff Larsen and Horneman) Group.

<sup>61</sup> [www.dlh-nordisk.com](http://www.dlh-nordisk.com)

<sup>62</sup> [www.dlh-nordisk.com](http://www.dlh-nordisk.com)

<sup>63</sup> The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is currently the only international certification and labelling system that uses globally endorsed ecological performance standards, ensures a traceable chain of custody from production to final consumption, and brings together a broad range of environmental, social and economic stakeholder interests.