The Congo Basin is an area of stunning biodiversity filled with approximately 10,000 species of tropical plants (nearly a third of which are endemic), 400 species of mammals, 1,000 species of birds and an estimated 700 species of fish. These include an array of endangered wildlife, such as lowland and mountain gorillas, chimpanzees, drill, bonobos and forest elephants.

For tens of thousands of years, these forests have also supported the livelihoods of many people. Today, the human population of the Congo Basin is approximately 30 million, comprising more than 150 ethnic groups—including the Baka, Bambuti and Efé (often collectively referred to as Pygmies). Like most forest-dependent groups, these communities have a tremendous knowledge of biodiversity, and their harvesting of forest products—be it for domestic consumption or trade—generates critical household income and provides them with a huge opportunity for sustainable economic growth.

Although overall deforestation rates in the region are still lower than those in parts of the Amazon and Southeast Asia, they have accelerated over the past few years, driven by the establishment of large-scale agricultural and mining operations. With the aid of government agencies, large firms have been seizing swaths of land in forest areas that were traditionally under ancestral tenure and rapidly converting them to mono-crop rubber and oil palm plantations.

But even as the Congo Basin and other parts of the global tropics face these mounting threats, a promising alternative has begun to emerge: the devolution of forest management to local communities. Across Latin America—where the Rainforest Alliance has a long history of collaborating with forest communities—the evidence clearly shows that community-managed forests can outperform strict protected areas when it comes to maintaining forest cover, while also providing economic development opportunities for marginalized groups.

In the Maya Biosphere of Guatemala, for example, a recent analysis showed that deforestation rates in community forests where the Rainforest Alliance has worked were close to zero, while adjacent protected areas experienced forest conversion rates that were higher than regional averages. In Africa, this approach is still in its nascent stages, but there is one country where community forestry has already shown significant potential as a tool for conserving forests and promoting sustainable local development.

Helping Communities Thrive

More than any other country in the Congo Basin, Cameroon has allowed community forests to be established in high-biodiversity natural forests.

1 http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/publications/deforestation-trends-maya-biosphere-reserve
Since the country revised its forestry law in 1994, it has recognized 267 community forests, which collectively cover an area of about 2.47 million acres (1 million ha). But although the community forestry model has been in use there for more than 20 years, its adoption has been slowed by the limited capacity of local communities to comply with complicated regulations, operate competitive enterprises and access markets for sustainable forest products. Addressing these needs has been the focus of the Rainforest Alliance’s efforts to foster community forest enterprise (CFE) around the globe.

We work with CFES across the tropics to help them develop sustainable integrated management plans, apply best forestry practices in the field, build their administrative capacities, invest in strategies for value-added processing and penetrate premium markets for wood and other forest products. Over the last five years, we have applied this approach in Cameroon, focusing on two clusters of community forests that border protected areas in the country’s southern region—one cluster that’s adjacent to the Campo-Ma’an National Park and another that’s near the Dja Biosphere Reserve. Both protected areas harbor an array of endangered species, such as the lowland gorilla, African forest elephant, western chimpanzee and Grey-necked Picathartes.

Our work has benefited 12 communities that are home to a total of approximately 10,000 individuals, including members of the Baka peoples. We have collaborated with these communities to lay the groundwork for the harvest of timber and non-timber forest products, while strengthening their internal governance and enabling them to operate in a competitive market environment. Additionally, we have facilitated the establishment of four local community-owned forest enterprises as a tool for pooling investments in equipment and social infrastructure, increasing negotiating power and improving access to markets. This work has been carried out in a participatory manner, in cooperation with two local NGOs.

Despite extremely challenging conditions, these communities have made significant progress over the past five years. As a result of our support, they’ve approved management plans that cover a total of 74,000 acres (30,000 ha), forged business alliances with buyers, and bine communities have signed sales contracts—a major step forward for community forests in the region.

We have also worked to diversify their forest production beyond timber by encouraging the collective harvesting, processing and marketing of wild mangoes (Irvingia gabonensis), which are used to make edible pastes, and the Njansang nut, a non-timber forest product from the Ricinodendron heudelotii tree that is pro-

cessed into oil and body soap. These activities directly involve about 200 people and provide substantial benefits to women and indigenous households, significantly increasing what they earn from the forest. Income from the sale of timber has doubled, and among those communities that have taken control of forest harvesting, revenues have increased more than five-fold, a tremendous improvement that lays the foundation for further investment in CFE development. Moreover, the collective marketing of wild mango has increased sales earnings by an average of more than 75 percent.

Poised at a Crossroads

Although much has been achieved, our work in Cameroon has reached a crossroad. If the country’s CFES are to become viable competitive businesses, they need additional support. For example, the communities where we’ve worked have recently received four mobile sawmills, but while these tools could help them to expand the on-site processing of wood and increase revenues, the technical capacity required to operate them and organize a production team remains limited. And even as these communities continue to develop this internal capacity, they must also meet existing market demands and keep up with the timely delivery of high-quality products. Helping them to attain financial autonomy would free them from their dependence on external actors who try to take advantage of resource limitations and internal conflicts.

And yet even as the need for assistance grows, the funding mechanism that supports our work in Cameroon is winding down. At this crucial stage in the development of the country’s community forests—which serve as a model for forest conservation and livelihood development throughout the wider Congo Basin—the Rainforest Alliance’s technical assistance efforts must be expanded. The very future of this powerful model hangs in the balance.