

Fighting for their forests:

Courageous communities take on the clear-cutters in South Sudan's pristine woods

Literally everything is under attack in South Sudan, including and especially the people, their livestock and livelihoods. Also being assaulted: fair political and business life, environmental standards, free press and much more.

Add South Sudan's habitats to the list. The country is home to some of the world's largest and most stunningly beautiful and precious tracts of unspoiled nature, including the Sudd wetlands, which have given the country its name, and the Lela-Bul forest in South Sudan's southern reaches.

Both habitats rival the Amazon for size and biodiversity, and both are suffering its fate.

The Sudd is being contaminated by wastes stemming from oil fields.

Ignoring regulations designed to protect Lela-Bul, wildcatting loggers are swarming over from Uganda to clear-cut one of Africa's last greatest stands of first-growth forest.

As environmental journalist Hannington A. Ochan reports, this onslaught is finally inciting resistance. The communities that have lived from and with the forests for generations are organizing themselves to fight for them.

"They call themselves 'vigilantes', and they have stationed themselves in the forests surrounding the villages in southern South Sudan's Magwi county, which is home to Acholi tribe.

The vigilantes are actually young people who have been armed by their villages and given a big and risky brief: go into the forests and do the job of forest wardens: apprehend the loggers – who are often heavily armed - and bring them to the authorities for judgment.

Insert: Forest cover – or covered – 30% of South Sudan. Will the efforts of self-appointed local forest wardens suffice to enable these highly-valuable biodiversity hotspots to survive the onslaught by greedy loggers and their accomplices in the business world and in government in South Sudan and Uganda?

The vigilantes are under the commands of each village's community elders. One of these elders is Obany Michael. He is the chief of Owiny-Ki-Bul village, and he is proud of what his group of young forest wardens have already achieved.

"A few days ago, our vigilantes got lucky and caught 10 loggers at the border with Uganda. The vigilantes brought the loggers to our village, where they are now being detained," says the chief, who mentions the stiff jail time awaiting the loggers should they be convicted.

“The loggers are Ugandans. None of them has the proper authorizations. They told us that they are just one of the four groups forming what they call the ‘syndicate’, that it is also comprised of South Sudanese and Uganda businessmen and of the soldiers watching the loggers’ backs when they are cutting timber, and that they have accomplices among us, the local people,” Chief Michael adds. As he states, the vigilantes’ work has inspired the South Sudanese army and the local police to work to save the forests.

“They have taken to going out on patrol in the forests very frequently, sometimes up to three times a day,” Chief Michael reports.

Notwithstanding the vigilantes’ work, the patrols and the prospects of receiving stiff sentences when apprehended, the loggers are still very much pursuing their illegal trade. Chief Michael despairingly reports that each night brings the transporting of huge loads of logs – under the cover of darkness – out of the country.

There is a very good reason for the villagers’ fearless militancy towards the loggers: they can’t survive without the forest, which is their sources of fuel, wood and food.

And of income – from legal logging, which is undertaken once the requisite permits have been secured from the county authorities, in coordination with the village chiefs.



Hannington A. Ochan, 34 years old, is a South Sudanese-Ugandan journalist whose career has included stints as the Voice of America's correspondent in South Sudan, as co-editor for The Niles (www.theniles.org), as a consultant for the development of South Sudan's radio industry, and as a journalism trainer. Ochan is a graduate of Cavendish University in Kampala, Uganda.