

Getting to the bottom of Africa's carbon figures

Voice-over 1:

Joseph Levillain and Jean-Claude Mazoumbou are regular visitors to this eucalyptus plantation near Pointe Noire, the economic capital of the Republic of the Congo, in central Africa. Of interest to them are the trees' wood and foliage. Researchers measure and weigh the leaves, both growing and fallen. They want to know how many nutrients and how much CO₂ these trees can absorb at different stages of their lives.

Voice-over 2:

Eucalyptus is a plant that grows very quickly, so it traps carbon quickly. The plant will feed off atmospheric CO₂. Once the carbon's inside the trunk, some of it is fixed in the wood. The plant also transfers it into the ground, the bark, the branches and the leaves. These will decompose to form an organic matter that's pretty much carbonised, with nitrogen and other mineral elements.

Voice-over 1:

What the researchers have to do is measure carbon levels in the trees' roots and surrounding soil. Several holes are dug 6 metres deep to recover underground water at different depths. The samples are dispatched to a laboratory to help answer various questions.

Voice-over 3:

Is it carbon that's existed here for centuries or has it only been here since man's arrival? Lots of burning goes on in the area, and then on top of that there's been lots of building here. Did man bring the carbon with him?

Voice-over 1:

Unindustrialised and sparsely populated but for a small urbanised corner of the country, 60 per cent of the Republic of the Congo is forest. It is therefore not a heavy polluter. The carbon cycle here remains a mystery, as it does in most of sub-Saharan Africa. No-one quite knows how much CO₂ or other greenhouse gases the continent produces.

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