

INTERNATIONAL
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Canadian company to harvest underwater timber in Ghana

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TORONTO: A Ghanaian conservation research center will assist a Canadian company in harvesting underwater trees in one of the world's largest tropical hardwood forests.

The process promises to leave a smaller environmental footprint than traditional logging, but worries some fishermen in Ghana's Volta Lake region who are concerned about disruption to the habitat of the area's tilapia and other fish, environmental groups say.

Ghana's Nature Conservation Research Centre said this week that it will help Clark Sustainable Resource Developments in taking dead, water-submerged trees instead of live trees from land.

"Volta Lake has huge potential in terms of timber resources, but because we're cutting dead trees, we're limiting our impact on the environment," said Wayne Dunn, president and CEO of the Canadian company.

Underwater harvesting has been around since the 1950s, but has grown as an industry in the last decade as companies develop new higher-tech machinery and as environmental concerns have come to the forefront. Survey boats equipped with sonar systems locate and identify the volume of timber potentially available for harvest.

According to 2004 figures, some 35,000 square kilometers (13,500 square miles) of forest worldwide have already been submerged by dams.

As with any logging, there is an environmental impact in harvesting the wood, but it is minimal compared to traditional logging practices, said Stephen Hazell, executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada. In underwater harvesting, some dirt gets into streams and disturbs aquatic life, but the amount of sediment introduced into the water is minuscule compared to logging on land, he said.

"Underwater logging is actually a great harvesting method. The quality of timber is excellent and you're replacing the need to remove trees from live forests," Hazell said.

Dunn said he is aware of the concerns of fishermen and is working with the local community to determine an operation that will limit negative impacts on the Volta Lake ecosystem. He said social and environmental impact studies are under way.

Volta Lake is a reservoir that was created as part of a hydroelectric project more than 40 years ago when the newly independent Ghanaian government dammed the Volta rivers to flood the forest to create a massive hydroelectric generator. The 8,600-square-kilometer (800-square-meter) Volta Lake has mahogany, odum, wawa, kusia, ceiba and danta trees.

Once the trees are sawed into lumber, CSRD says it will sell 20 percent to local Ghanaian industries and 80 percent internationally. Dunn said there is already interest from marketing and distribution companies from Europe and Asia.

The company plans to harvest the Volta Lake trees in March 2008.