Part 3: Gabon Case Study

The HCS+ methodology tested on the ground

Section 3: Description of the Three New Oil Palm Estates Being Developed by Olam in Gabon

Agricultural development in Gabon

Gabon is a sovereign state on the west coast of Central Africa. It became independent from France in 1960. It has an area of nearly 270,000 square kilometres and its population is estimated at 1.6 million people.

Low population density, abundant petroleum, and foreign private investment have made Gabon one of the most prosperous countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the 4th highest Human Development Index and the third highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (after Equatorial Guinea and Botswana) in the region. About 11% of Gabon's land area is designated as National Parks.

Gabon's dependence on fossil fuel exports, comprising about 50% of GDP, has led to underinvestment in agriculture, and 60% of the food consumed in Gabon is imported. Gabon's National Strategic Plan calls for rapid agricultural development to diversify its economy, reduce its food imports, increase food security, reduce rural poverty and create job opportunities, especially for the 26% of the population who are unemployed.

In 2010, Olam entered into a joint venture with the Republic of Gabon (60:40 share respectively), to develop sustainable oil palm plantations. Olam Palm Gabon (subsequently referred to as Olam) now manages a total area of 110,983 ha, of which more than 50% has been set aside to protect HCV areas, riparian buffers and wetlands[6]. As of October 2015, Olam has planted nearly 21,000 ha of high-yielding palm varieties, provided jobs for over 4,000 people in rural areas, and built schools, dispensaries, housing and access roads for local villagers.

Olam is committed to obtaining RSPO certification for all its plantations, to avoiding conversion of High Conservation Value forests, HCS forests or peatlands, to obtaining Free Prior and Informed Consent for its plantations, and to improving rural livelihoods.[7]

Gabon's Climate Action Plan and National Land Use Plan

Under its April 2015 Climate Action Plan for the UNFCCC[8], Gabon committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 50% in 2025 relative to 2000. Achieving this reduction depends on the rational use of Gabon's forest and agricultural land resources based on the adoption of a new Forestry Code to prevent forest degradation; the creation of 13 new National Parks and other restrictions on land clearance; and the adoption of a National Land Use Plan that allocates land for different uses and explicitly excludes conversion of *"intact forests, high conservation value forests and forests which are particularly rich in carbon"*.

Gabon is the second-most heavily forested country by percent cover, with less than 7% non-forested land (excluding urban and national park areas). Not all of this meets the environmental (precipitation, topography, soil fertility) and economic criteria (accessibility to markets and workforce) for plantation development.

According to the Land Use National Plan (PNAT)[9] under development, some areas of logged-out, degraded or secondary forests with lower than average carbon stocks and where the fauna has been depleted or eliminated by strong hunting pressures, are available for agricultural conversion. The agricultural suitability of these areas needs to be carefully tested and agricultural conversion needs to comply with the Land Use National Plan and the 50% emissions reduction target. Olam contributed to the planning process by sharing information on the agronomic and economic requirements for the development to oil palm and other crops, and by emphasising the environmental and social constraints to be observed in order to comply with international crop sustainability standards.

Olam land leases in Gabon span the full range of habitats from savannah to scrub, wetlands, woody pioneer vegetation, and forests. Some of the first areas proposed did not meet Olam's Palm Policy criteria, and Olam therefore worked with the Government to pre-select least-risk areas. As no national or international consensus on HCS thresholds existed, Olam only considered operating in secondary and/or logged-over forests where carbon stocks were significantly lower than in mature Central African forests, and only where third party assessment with full public and expert consultation did not reveal the presence of HCVs.

In line with its Palm Policy, Olam then completed a full due diligence and FPIC process for all new palm plantations prior to any development activity. Data collected for the ESIA and HCV assessment included topography and canopy height (provided by wall to wall LiDAR), biodiversity (flora assessment based on forest and savannah plots, mammal fauna assessed

[6] http://olamgroup.com/products-services/food-staples-packaged-foods/palm/faq-and-reports/
[7] http://olamgroup.com/sustainability/codes-policies-2/palm-policy/
[8] http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/Gabon/1/20150331%20INDC%20Gabon.pdf
[9] https://unfccc.int/files/cooperation_and_support/capacity_building/application/pdf/gabon_durban_forum.pdf

using transect sign counts followed by camera trapping, and sampling of fish, aquatic invertebrates, and insects), hydrological regime, water quality, soils and soil chemistry, and social data based on socioeconomic surveys and full participatory mapping.

These data were compiled into a regulatory ESIA and Environmental and Social Management Plan for each site, as well as an HCV assessment subject to a broad consultation process (including peer review by the HCV Resource Network for its "Mouila Lot 3" plantation). Olam also shared its HCV and ESIA assessments with NGOs (including national and international critics of the RSPO process), and published its summary findings via its website.

In the final step of the process, Olam completed FPIC negotiations with each affected village and signed a Social Contract with each one specifying the conditions and compensations due for granting Olam access to traditionally managed lands. In the few cases where villages refused to grant access, the community themselves identified the boundaries of their traditional lands and Olam excised them from the plantations.

Landsat-8-imagery (14/02/2013) within the Ngounie Province (Gabon)
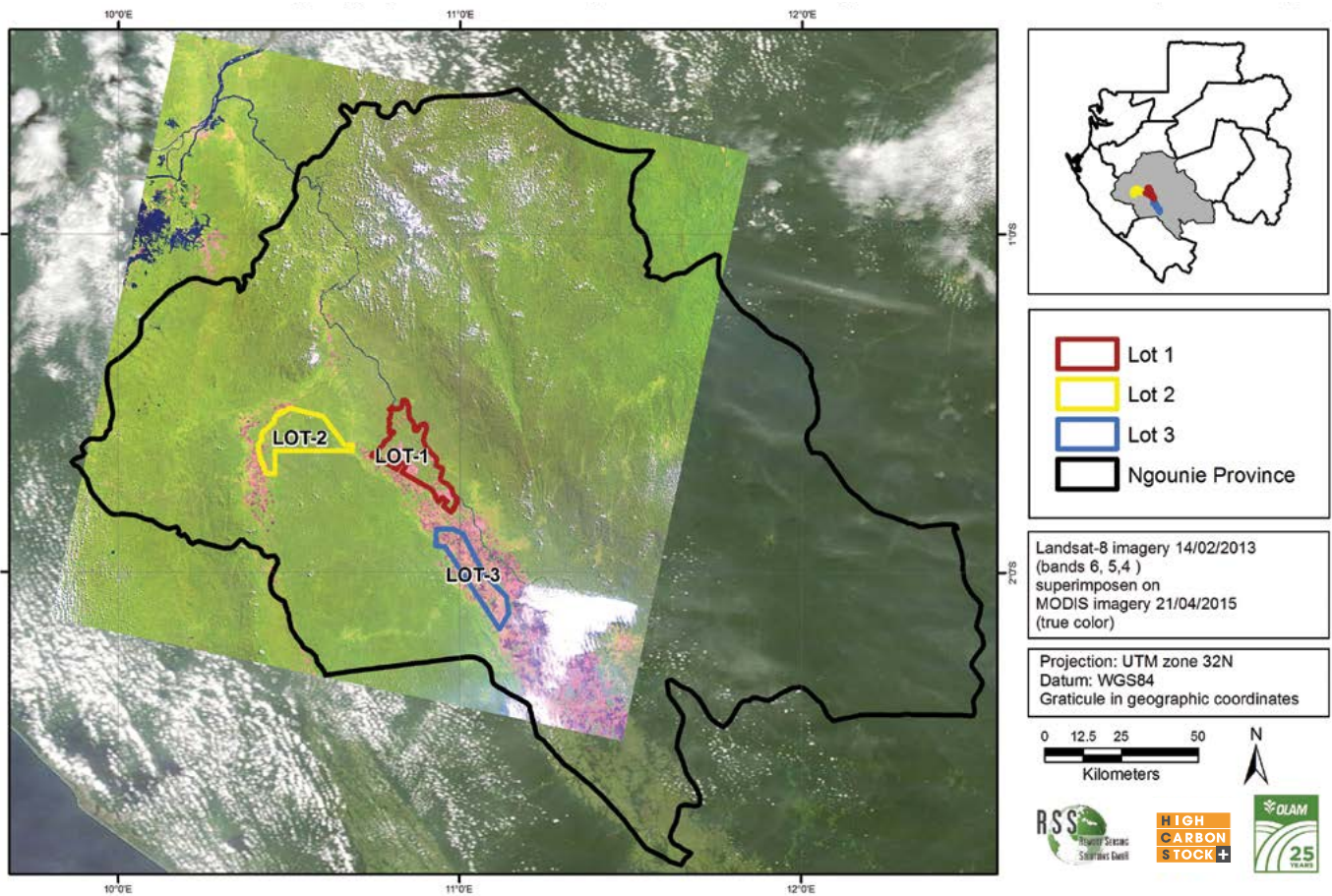
Figure 2: Location of the three Olam oil palm plantations (Lots 1, 2, and 3) within the Ngounie Province (South Gabon).
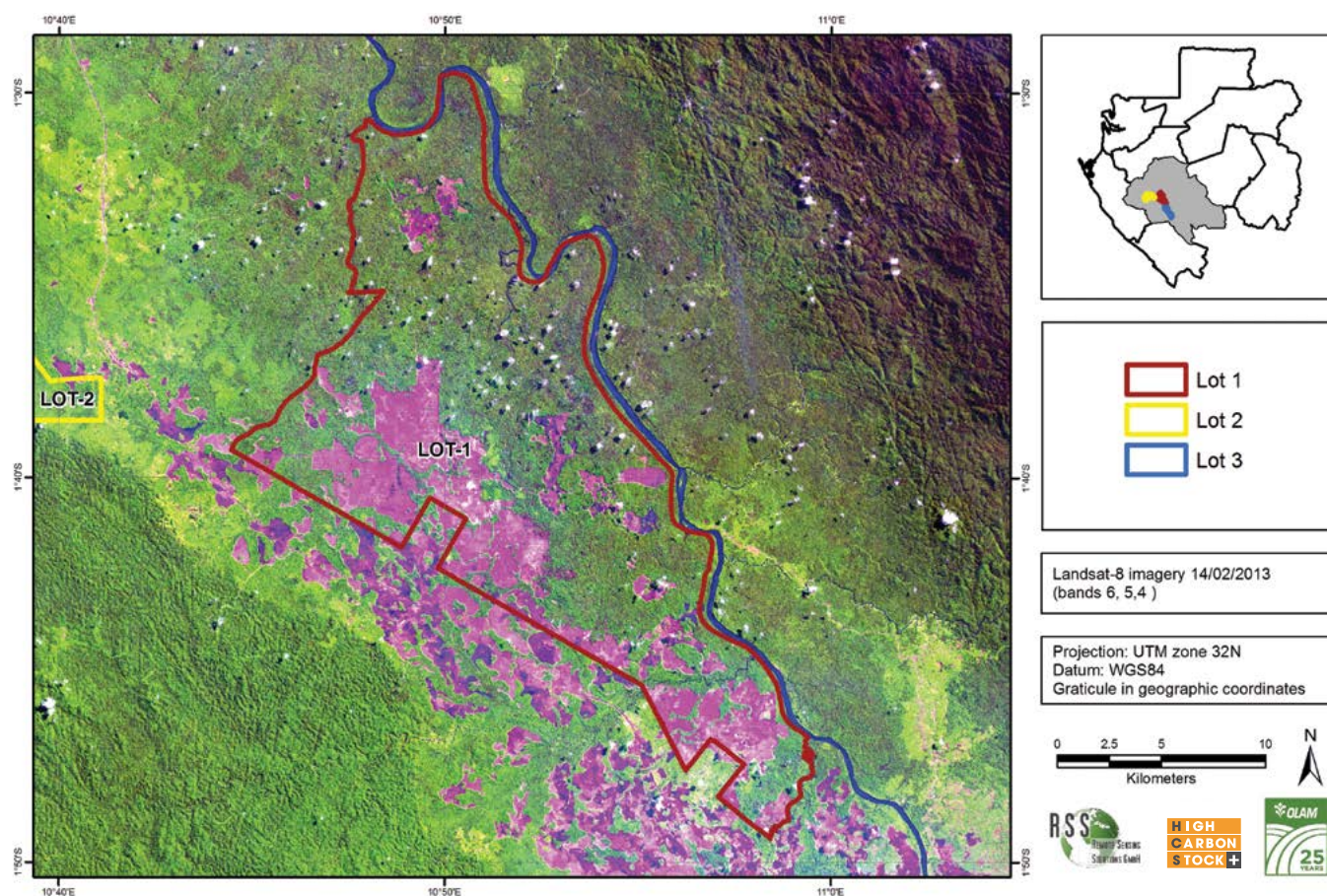
Landsat-8-imagery (14/02/2013) LOT 1

Figure 3: Landsat-8 imagery covering Lot 1 at the start of plantation development.

Ecological and social context of Olam's palm plantations in Ngounie Province, South Gabon

Olam has three palm plantations (Lots 1, 2 and 3) in the Ngounie River valley (Figure 2) in a landscape where the savannah component is maintained by recurrent fire.

Most of the forests in Lots 1 and 2 (Figure 3 and 4) are quite young and dominated by the pioneer tree Okoumé *Aucoumea klaineana* which colonises savannah areas and abandoned farmlands, and does not persist in mature forest. These mixed Okoumé forests have been subject to repeated, patchy logging in the last 60-70 years and are therefore very heterogeneous in quality and composition. Patches of weedy "parasol" trees *Musanga cecropioides* are also frequently found in former slash and burn agriculture sites.

Older and richer forests with less disturbance, higher biodiversity, more primary forest species and rare or endemic species are found along the Ngounie River floodplain in Lot 1 (Figure 3) and on the plateau in Lot 2 (Figure 4). Lot 3 (Figure 5) consists of 75% savannah, whereas the remaining 25% is degraded, or riparian forest included in protected buffer zones.

The forests within the concessions support a wide range of animal species, albeit at low densities maintained by hunting due to the proximity to villages and roads. Bush meat is traditionally an important part of village diets, and commercial hunting in the past exported large quantities of bush meat to regional markets and the capital, Libreville. The spatial layout of the plantations was designed to conserve the HCV ecosystems and to provide connectivity, allowing animal populations to find refuge in the HCV areas and to move across the landscape within wide forest corridors. Olam has implemented a faunal management plan to halt illegal hunting on its estates.

The different prior conditions in the three lots in terms of the spatial distribution and magnitude of forest above-ground carbon, land-use and planting stage make them ideal to test the carbon estimation and carbon neutral aspects of the HCS+ methodology. While in Lot 1, HCS forests only occur in parts of the concession in patches of various sizes, Lot 2 is characterised by a large proportion of near-continuous HCS forests, whereas Lot 3 had hardly any HCS forest.
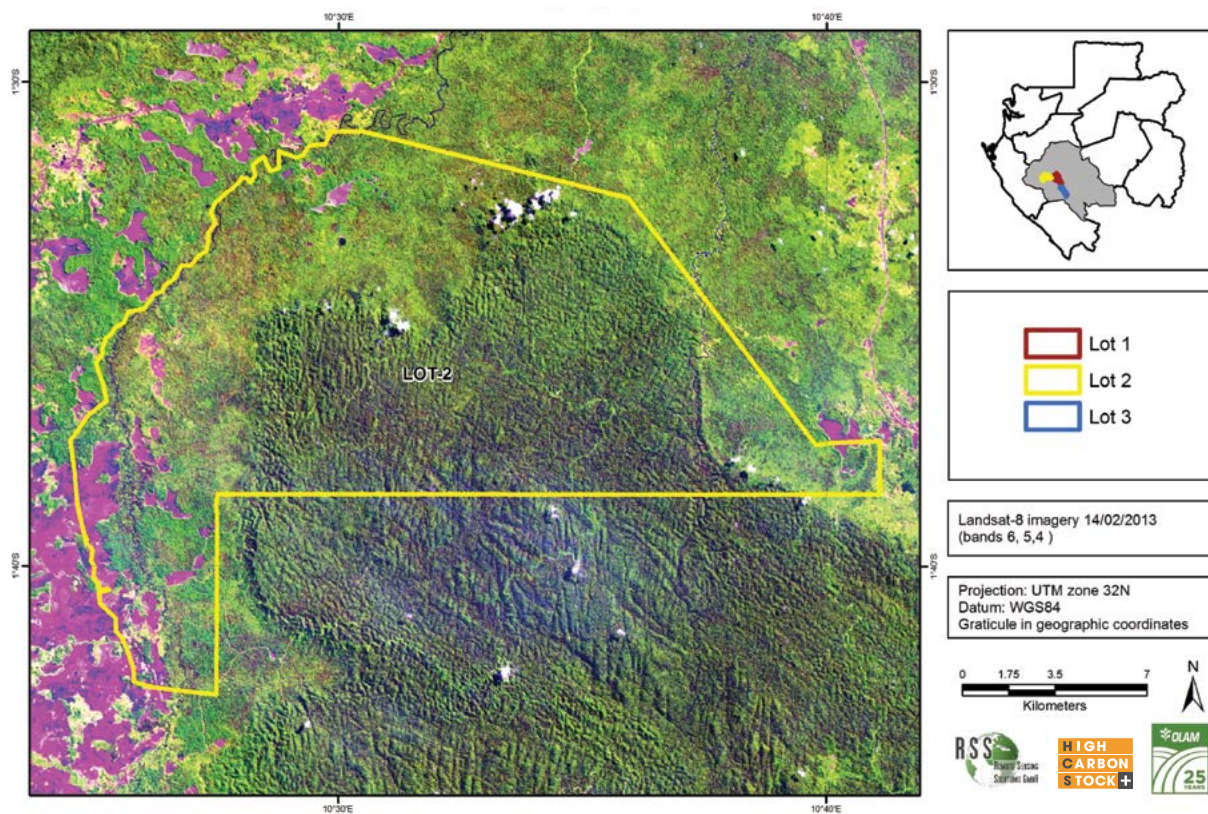
Landsat-8-imagery (14/02/2013) LOT 2

Figure 4: Landsat-8 imagery covering Lot 2 prior to development.
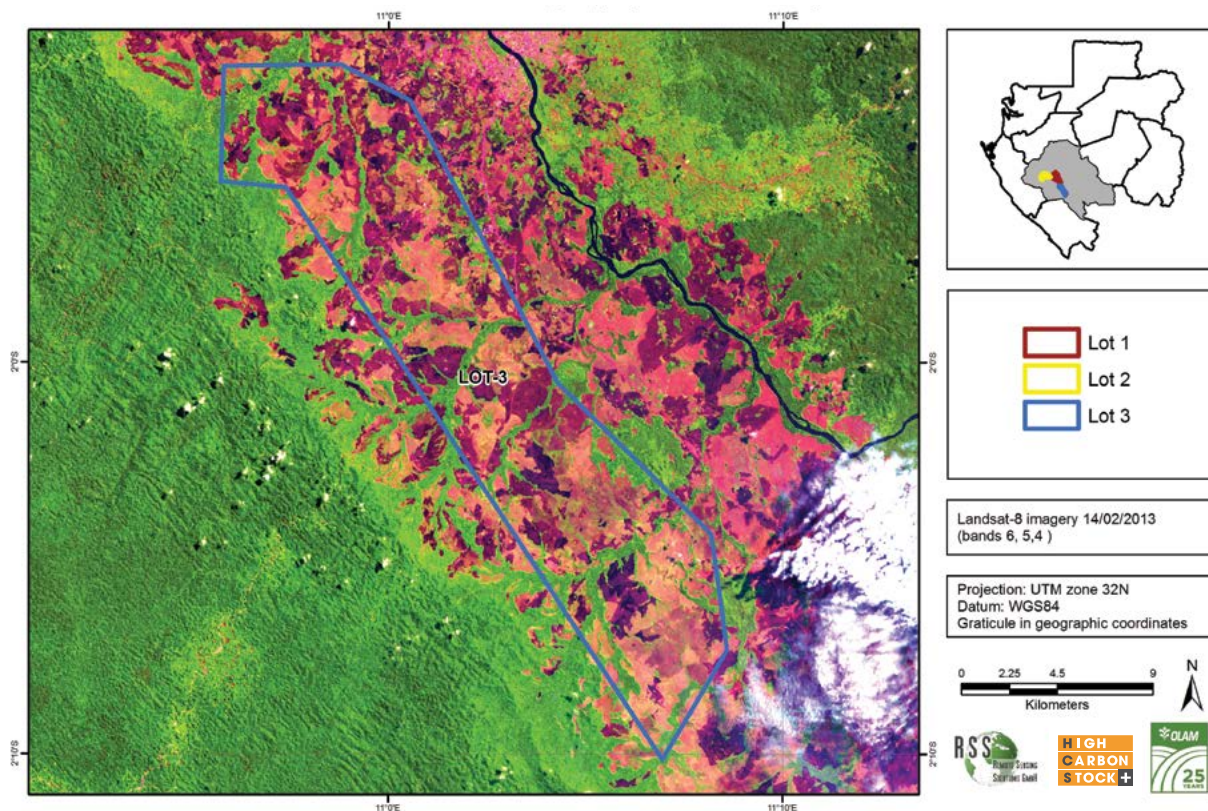
Landsat-8-imagery (14/02/2013) LOT 3

Figure 5: Landsat-8 imagery covering Lot 3 prior to development.