

## **The African Swamp Protecting Earth's Environment**

There is a play by one of my favorite writers, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, I would like to tell you about, “The Swamp Dwellers.” “The Swamp Dwellers” is about a blind beggar who attempts to buy a piece of swampland because he believes that the swamps will provide him with a better livelihood. However, the villagers in that swamp believe that deep in the forests of the swamp lies a deity whose job is to protect them from all misfortune.

There is another swamp that protects us from misfortune. And holds the promise of humanity’s survival. Those are the peatlands of the Congo Basin. The peatlands of the Congo Basin are a lush, vast, expanse of weeds, shrubs and trees that absorb carbon from the atmosphere. They span 145,000 kilometers. The peat formations began 10,000 years ago, when man moved from hunter-gatherer to farmer. Nature, I guess, figured, “I better start protecting myself.”

A couple of years ago, scientists discovered that these tropical peatlands are probably the largest carbon sink in the world. They store 30 billion tons of carbon. If they did not exist, we would have probably already stepped beyond the threshold of 1.5 degrees of warming.

However, the peatlands are under threat. We have, of course, oil explorations being contemplated. Logging licenses have already been awarded. And many of the communities that live around the peatlands have just this for survival. We have all collectively seen, in the Amazon forest, burning down because of economic interest. Turning this forest from carbon sink to carbon source. We have witnessed, in Indonesia, the swamps drained for palm oil plantations. Turning them from carbon sink to carbon source. It will be devastating if the same fate were to befall the peatlands of the Congo Basin.

The peatlands are a passion of mine. I believe they must be protected. But we must also, in this fight against climate change, ensure that responsibility and accountability are adequately apportioned. The world emits over 54 billion tons of carbon. The peatlands of the Congo Basin absorb a large majority of that. Africa emits 1.2 billion tons of carbon a year. And the communities that live around the peatlands have no access to basic services. Education, health care, clean drinking water, an adequate meal, good transportation, technology. Clearly, they are not tweeting.

The peatlands are an economic asset, which, if valued appropriately, could provide the stepping stone for these communities to improve their livelihoods. Nature has acted already as a store of value for the peatlands. A kind of federal reserve. Now, imagine if we had a price for carbon at 50 dollars. With 30 billion tons of carbon sequestered in the peatlands, we’re talking at 1.5 trillion. A peatland development fund could help us today to address the stubborn and seemingly persistent developmental challenges that the continent faces today.

This is not just about decarbonization. This is also about development with dignity. This is about equity. It is about justice, and it is about transparency.

Indeed, Africa has not contributed enormously to the climate crisis. But we have visibly contributed enormously to keeping the planet alive. We can, therefore... (applause)  
...not expect, but as the blind beggar, we continue to plead for assistance to achieve a better livelihood, and we certainly cannot be like Wole Soyinka's swamp dwellers who wait patiently while the world overlooks and undermines Africa's contribution to climate change.

Science has recognized Africa's contribution. I ask you to join me in recognizing Africa's contribution, and collectively, we must ask the markets to recognize and adequately reward Africa's contribution by putting a price on carbon.

1. What does Songwe want to happen with the Congo Basin peatlands and the surrounding communities? Why does she want it to happen?

1. Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?

- A. The peatlands of the Congo Basin are a useless swampland and should be used for farming.
- B. The peatlands of the Congo Basin should become industrialized so that the local community benefits.
- C. The peatlands of the Congo Basin are the best resource for lumber and fossil fuels, and the local community should profit from them.
- D. The peatlands of the Congo Basin help the world in the fight against climate change, and the local community should benefit financially.

2.

2. What evidence from the text supports the author's position that Africa is a leader in the fight against climate change?
- A. "However, the villagers in that swamp believe that deep in the forests of the swamp lies a deity whose job is to protect them from all misfortune." **(Paragraph 1)**
  - B. "A couple of years ago, scientists discovered that these tropical peatlands are probably the largest carbon sink in the world." **(Paragraph 3)**
  - C. "Now, imagine if we had a price for carbon at 50 dollars. With 30 billion tons of carbon sequestered in the peatlands, we're talking at 1.5 trillion." **(Paragraph 6)**
  - D. "Indeed, Africa has not contributed enormously to the climate crisis. But we have visibly contributed enormously to keeping the planet alive." **(Paragraph 8)**

3.

3. What does the phrase "carbon sink" mean as used in **paragraphs 3** and 4?

- A. a source of carbon in the atmosphere
- B. a device from which carbon is poured
- C. a place where carbon is stored
- D. a hole that contains carbon

4.

4. Which statement best describes the relationship between "The Swamp Dwellers" (**Paragraph 1**) and the peatlands of the Congo Basin?

- A. Both contain a swamp whose value and importance have been overlooked.
- B. Both possess a swamp with powers that the community does not quite understand.
- C. Both have villagers whose belief in a god prevents them from benefiting from the swamp.
- D. Both take advantage of differently abled individuals in order to make a profit from the swamp.

5.

5. How does the author use rhetorical devices to argue that a price should be put on stored carbon? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

6.

# Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now

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By Matthew Olzmann

Most likely, you think we hated the elephant,  
the golden toad, the thylacine and all variations  
of whale harpooned or hacked into extinction.

It must seem like we sought to leave you nothing  
but benzene, mercury, the stomachs  
of seagulls rippled with jet fuel and plastic.

You probably doubt that we were capable of joy,  
but I assure you we were.

We still had the night sky back then,  
and like our ancestors, we admired  
its illuminated doodles  
of scorpion outlines and upside-down ladles.

Absolutely, there were some forests left!  
Absolutely, we still had some lakes!

I'm saying, it wasn't all lead paint and sulfur dioxide.  
There were bees back then, and they pollinated  
a euphoria of flowers so we might  
contemplate the great mysteries and finally ask,  
"Hey guys, what's transcendence?"

And then all the bees were dead.

1. Compare the state of the environment in this poem with the speech from Vera Songwe: In the letter, who is responsible for destroying the environment? In the speech, who contributes the most to climate change?