The necessary changes to genuinely celebrate the International Year of Forestsnter title here

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2011 the International Year of Forests, and WRM has decided to devote its first bulletin of the year to this significant event. According to the resolution adopted by the General Assembly, the UN is committed to promoting “the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.”

The motto for the year is “Celebrating Forests for People”. The UN states that the world’s forests are home to 300 million people, particularly in countries of the South, while the livelihoods of over 1.6 billion people depend on forests. Moreover, forests cover more than 30% of the planet’s total land area. But despite the importance of the role of forest peoples in the conservation of forests, do they really have any reason to “celebrate”?

The 2010 FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment (http://foris.fao.org/static/data/fra2010/FRA2010_Report_1oct2010.pdf) reports that around 130 million hectares of the world’s forests were lost between the years 2000 and 2010, of which more than 40 million hectares were primary forests. The largest losses took place in Latin America and Africa. FAO also noted that in the previous decade, from 1990 to 2000, an even greater area of forest was destroyed, approximately 160 million hectares. Despite this overall reduction in deforestation when comparing the last two decades, the rate of deforestation remains “alarmingly high” according to FAO itself. It should also be stressed that the continued destruction of forests has had serious negative impacts on the lives of millions of people whose survival depends or depended on them.

According to FAO, the loss of forest area in the 2000-2010 period was “lower” as a result of the increase in the area of “planted forests” around the world during this same period, estimated at 50 million hectares. Tree plantations currently account for around 7% of the world’s total “forest” area. It must be stressed, however, that plantations are not forests – a fact that is well known by the people to whom the UN is dedicating this International Year of Forests. Unfortunately, this rather obvious fact is still not recognized by FAO, a UN specialized agency. In addition to the resulting distortion of deforestation figures, FAO’s classification of plantations as forests means that once again, it is serving the interests of the hundreds of corporations that promote and profit from large-scale monoculture tree plantations, placing value only on the trees and not on the hundreds of millions of people in the world whose livelihoods depend on the wide range of benefits provided by forests.

The driving force behind the destruction of the world’s forests continues to be the global model of production and consumption rooted in a globalized capitalist economy, which views natural resources, including forests, as sources of exploitation and profit. In the case of forests, the exploitation of wood, primarily for industrial use, continues to be the main focus of activity, promoting the destruction of forests and benefiting the timber industry. According to FAO figures, between 2003 and 2007, 3.4 billion cubic metres of wood were taken from the world’s forests, valued at more than $100 billion USD annually.

In addition, the support and promotion of so-called “development” projects by national governments

and international financial institutions have contributed to the process of forest destruction, particularly in the countries of the South, with drastic impacts on the lives of local communities and especially women. The most well-known examples are infrastructure projects such as the building of highways, railways and shipping channels, the expansion of monoculture plantations of agricultural crops and pasture land, industrial shrimp farms in mangroves and coastal areas, hydroelectric dams, oil drilling and mining. On the whole, these activities are primarily aimed at exports to the countries with the highest rates of consumption, typically in the North.

We should also highlight the role of new trends that have had an increasingly greater impact on the process of deforestation in the last decade. The large-scale use of wood as a “renewable” source of energy to “combat” climate change and the production of cellulosic ethanol from wood have spurred greater exploitation of trees and consequently continued destruction of forests. Added to this are the industrial plantations of crops destined for agrofuel production, such as monoculture oil palm plantations, as well as the effects of climate change itself that negatively affect the present and future state of forests, such as the increased incidence of forest fires.

If forests are considered to be ever more essential for the survival of life on earth in its diverse dimensions, then what measures have been adopted to halt this continued process of destruction? It is obvious that state policies for forest protection continue to be insufficient, given that, according to FAO, around 80% of the world’s forests are publicly owned, or in other words, controlled by national governments. Despite this fact, however, the number of staff employed by public forest institutions worldwide has decreased by 1.2% annually since 2000. And although there has been an increase in the area of forest under management plans around the world, FAO itself admits that this is not necessarily an “adequate indicator” of the area under sustainable forest management, or rather, management that ensures the protection of forests. This situation is even more troubling when FAO reports that private ownership and management of forests, including ownership by private companies, is also on the rise.

At the same time, in recent years we have witnessed an upsurge in interest in the protection of forests on the part of the countries of the North. This interest, which might initially seem like something positive, is not a result of greater sensitivity and awareness among these governments and their big corporations of the vital importance of forests, nor does it stem from recognition of the rights of the peoples who inhabit them. This interest results from their discovery that forests store large amounts of carbon, which in turn led to the development of a mechanism known as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). On the basis of the fact that, at a global level, 20% of greenhouse gas emissions result from the destruction of forests, the countries of the North, instead of reducing the excessive burning of fossil fuels that sustains their model of development and oil company profits, have turned to the reduction of deforestation just as a more financially attractive alternative for reducing carbon emissions.

Nevertheless, this is a false solution to the problem, because, among other reasons, the carbon emissions resulting from deforestation “may be chemically identical to those coming from the burning of fossil fuels, but the two are climatologically different. Carbon released from deforestation does not increase the total amount of carbon being exchanged among the atmosphere, the oceans, soils, forests, and so on. Carbon released from fossil fuels, on the other hand, does increase this above-ground carbon pool.” (1)

Negotiations around REDD and its various versions was one of the issues, or perhaps the only issue, on which progress was made from the point of view of its promoters at the most recent international conference on climate change, held in Cancún, Mexico in December 2010. REDD is one more step in

the wrong direction of the commoditization and control of forests by and for the countries and corporations of the North, allowing them to justify the continuation of their excessive carbon emissions. While the commoditization of nature has always ensured profits for big transnational corporations, it is highly doubtful that, given its underlying logic, it can also ensure the protection of forests. Without a doubt, it is a false solution to the climate crisis and its grave consequences.

Ultimately, we can conclude that there are very few reasons for forest peoples to “celebrate” this International Year of Forests. Nevertheless, the occasion could serve as an opportunity to achieve real advances. We believe that this will only be possible if the world’s governments and the UN clearly assess the genuine direct, indirect and underlying causes of the continued destruction of the world’s forests, making a clear distinction between plantations and forests. The next step would be to base the policies of governments and the UN on this assessment, and not on other interests, such as those of big corporations.

Since its founding, WRM has stressed that it is the forest peoples who have historically done the most to protect the world’s forests. Nevertheless, many of these peoples, threatened by various development projects, are still fighting hard for the recognition of their rights to their territories and their methods of forest management. There has been very little progress made in the recognition of these rights over the past 10 years, and in cases where progress has been made, the rights they have achieved continue to be threatened.

The forest management systems and proposals of forest peoples should be concretely and effectively recognized by the UN and national governments, because they are the best means of ensuring the future survival of the world’s forests. But these peoples need much more support and acknowledgment in order to improve and adapt these forest management systems and proposals, and this includes adapting them to current conditions, which in many respects are different from those of the past – for example, as a result of the impacts of climate change itself.

In the meantime, the enormous financial resources used to subsidize the destructive activities of corporations, with serious impacts on the forests and their peoples, must be stopped as soon as possible. This financing often comes from public sources, as well as international “development” banks. At the same time, real solutions, such as a reduction of the model of excessive consumption practiced by a minority of the world’s inhabitants, must be urgently sought. If this does not happen, it will be impossible for the forest peoples to genuinely celebrate the dedication of this year to something of such vital importance for nature and humanity as a whole.

(1) WRM, “From REDD to HEDD”,http://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/briefings/From_REDD_to_HEDD.pdf