
FAO and WWF: birds of a feather promote “planted forests” together

According to the FAO, halting deforestation is neither a political nor a social nor an environmental issue: it is just a matter of definitions.

As evidence of the above, the FAO has just released a report (1) which proves that we and many others have been absolutely wrong: deforestation in Asia is not only not happening; forests have actually expanded during the last decade! The report says: “Asia, which had a net loss [in forest area] in the 1990s, reported a net gain of forest in the period 2000–2010”. Hallelujah!

How did this miracle happen? Well, in the first place it is not a miracle (it’s a fraud) and in the second place it did not happen (it’s a lie). As the FAO report adds, the “net gain of forest” was “primarily due to the large-scale afforestation reported by China”. That means that those plantations “reported by China” -defined by FAO as “forests”- can counter the “continued high rates of net loss in many countries in South and Southeast Asia.”

As stated above, it’s just a matter of definitions. According to FAO’s “expertise”, any area covered by trees is a “forest”. Which means that if forests are destroyed –as they certainly have been- in Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, India, etc.- the Asian forest area will not have changed if a similar area has been planted with tree monocultures in another Asian country: in this case China.

But the issue is not restricted to Asia. FAO states that “Large-scale planting of trees is significantly reducing the net loss of forest area globally.” “The net change in forest area in the period 2000–2010 is estimated at –5.2 million hectares per year (an area about the size of Costa Rica), down from –8.3 million hectares per year in the period 1990–2000.”

Under this fraudulent approach, all the world’s forests can be destroyed and substituted by monoculture tree plantations (eucalyptus, pines, acacias, oil palm, rubber) and the “net forest area” will not have changed. As a result, the FAO will eventually be able to announce the good news that deforestation has been stopped!

Given the increasing number of people and organizations challenging FAO’s unscientific “forest” definition and the growing opposition to large-scale monoculture tree plantations, another organization has stepped in to provide support to both FAO and plantation companies: the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

This move comes as no surprise given the role played by WWF in corporate-friendly processes such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, the Roundtable on Responsible Soy, Sustainable Aquaculture and in the certification of monoculture tree plantations under the Forest Stewardship Council.

While it is difficult to see how the wildlife that WWF is supposed to be protecting – headed by the charismatic panda bear it uses as logo- may benefit from monoculture tree plantations, the fact is that WWF is leading and coordinating a process called the “New Generation Plantations Project” (2, 3).

Participants in the project are well known plantation companies, including Forestal Oriental (Finnish UPM/Kymmene subsidiary in Uruguay), Mondi (South Africa), Portucel (Portugal), Smurfit Kappa Carton de Colombia (Irish-Dutch company operating in Colombia), Stora Enso (Finnish-Swedish), UPM Kymmene (Finland), as well as the Sabah Forest Department (Malaysia), the State Forest Administration of China and the UK Forestry Commission.

What WWF is actually doing is to promote the expansion of tree monocultures and helping to greenwash the long –and well documented- history of past and present destructive activities of the companies and organizations involved in this project. At the same time, it is assisting the beleaguered FAO by continuing to define tree plantations as “planted forests”, thereby weakening the growing civil society demand for changing a definition that has so much served plantation companies for obscuring the true and negative nature of these monocultures.

Legend has it that the Italian mathematician, physicist and philosopher Galileo Galilei muttered the phrase “Eppur si muove” meaning “And yet it moves” after being forced to recant in 1633, before the Inquisition, his belief that the Earth moves around the Sun. In a similar vein, we hope that some serious FAO officials and honest WWF activists will be heard muttering: “And yet plantations are not forests”.

Sources:

- (1) <http://www.fao.org/forestry/static/data/fra2010/KeyFindings-en.pdf>
- (2) <http://assets.panda.org/downloads/newgenerationplantationsreport2009.pdf>
- (3) http://www.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/forestry/sustainable_plantations/newgenerationplantations/