
Two bright shining lies teaming up: Certification roundtables and REDD+

Certification has been described as the brightest of bright shining lies of the sustainability movement. And in recent years, certification roundtables have teamed up with another bright shining lie: REDD+. In the case of REDD+, the lie starts with the name. REDD+ is not designed to actually reduce emissions, at least not the emissions caused by those responsible for large-scale deforestation. Instead, REDD+ blames forest loss on peasant farmers and forest peoples while the corporations and government policies really responsible for large-scale deforestation continue unabated, with the deforestation they cause often greenwashed by the twin labels of commodity certification standards and REDD+.

“Certification is one of the brightest bright shining lies of the sustainability movement. I have seen the evidence too many times”, Scott Poynton writes in his 2015 book 'Beyond Certification'. (1) Poynton is a long-time supporter of voluntary certification and for many years he worked to improve the performance of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in particular. WRM's experience and documentation of the realities of both the FSC and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certainly confirm Scott Poynton's conclusion. (2) And in recent years, certification roundtables have begun to team up with another bright shining lie - REDD+. REDD stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the plus stands for much else, from industrial logging to tree plantations. In the case of REDD+, the lie starts with the name. REDD+ is not designed to actually reduce emissions, at least not the emissions caused by those responsible for large-scale deforestation. Even staunch REDD supporters like Ecosystem Marketplace have pointed out that REDD is no more than a financing mechanism *that might help people who wanted to save the forest*. No more than that, *"because anyone who responded to purely economic incentives would opt for palm oil"*, or soy or beef or eucalyptus or sugar cane. (3)

Maybe it's because voluntary certification standards and REDD+ are precisely *not* designed to deal with *the* main cause of deforestation – the unabated expansion of industrial agriculture and the related infrastructure from roads to hydrodams, oil wells and natural gas deposits (see article on the fertilizer industry and climate change in this bulletin) – that consumer goods companies like Unilever and international pledges claiming to halt deforestation increasingly promote them?

One such international pledge is the New York Declaration on Forests. The Declaration was launched during the [Climate Summit](#) hosted by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in New York in August 2014. Among the signatories are 30 national governments and some of the largest corporations in the food sector, including Unilever, Cargill and Bunge (see the [editorial of WRM's September bulletin](#)). The signatories of the declaration commit to cutting deforestation in half by 2020, and eliminating it entirely by 2030. But the Declaration doesn't include a plan for how to do that, nor does it say anything about halting the expansion of oil palm, soy, eucalyptus, acacia or

sugar cane plantations or cattle ranching. And that's the same for similar initiatives such as the Indonesian Palm Oil Pledge (4) or the Sustainable Palm Oil Manifesto (5).

Instead of outlining an action plan that would put a halt to the destruction caused by ever-expanding industrial agriculture monoculture plantations and cattle ranching into forests, they promote linking of voluntary certification standards like RSPO or FSC with REDD+. In addition, similar initiatives supported by global food corporations introduce another misleading concept: zero **net** deforestation. The Consumer Goods Forum, for example, *"a collaboration of 400 retailers, manufacturers, and service providers with combined annual sales of over US\$3 trillion"* that counts many large global food corporations from Unilever to Cargill, Mars and Nestle among its members, has set the target to pursue *"zero net deforestation"* by 2020. But zero **net** deforestation is not the same as zero deforestation! (6) Zero **net** deforestation means companies can continue destroying forests as long as they can show a certificate that someone elsewhere has planted trees or protected some forest of at least the same size as the one they converted into pasture or monoculture plantation and that apparently otherwise would have been destroyed.

What these bright shining lies of the sustainability movement do, is increase social acceptability in climate conscious overseas markets for the continued deforestation for expansion of agricultural export crop plantations and cattle ranching. They do so because carbon calculations and REDD+ credits make the resulting increase in greenhouse gas emissions invisible – or claim that the emissions will not harm the climate because their release has been nullified by extra savings elsewhere. The assumption is that buying certified REDD+ offset or forest carbon credits (generated through restricting peasant farming practises, shifting cultivation and other forest uses - see article in this bulletin on REDD and agriculture) can compensate for the deforestation emissions caused. The evidence is overwhelming that this assumption is false (see [more information here](#)). What's more, REDD+ also means that even more land will be locked up for commodity crop production: the actual production area for which corporations can obtain a label from existing certification roundtables **and** the land used as a REDD+ offset, also certified to some standard attesting that the climate-conscious consumer can keep buying the product in question without scruples.

The combination of the two bright shining lies of voluntary certification standards and REDD+ and the addition of the concept of 'zero **net** deforestation' thus allows corporations to continue their destruction behind the smokescreen of green labels and misleading carbon calculations. Just like the environmental and social standards negotiated at certification roundtables were the response to growing consumer demand for "sustainable" commodity crops, the same certification initiatives are increasingly considering carbon in response to the growing attention to climate change among consumers and government initiatives. All the large agricultural commodity roundtables, whether for oil palm, soy, sugar cane or beef, now include requirements related to greenhouse gas emissions. The focus of the combined bright shining lies of REDD+ and voluntary certification standards is therefore not on halting expansion but on enabling expansion of industrial agriculture into intact forests by working around patches of 'high carbon' or 'high biodiversity conservation value' forests.

Wide corporate engagement in these initiatives shows that the twinning of certification roundtables and REDD+ provides opportunities to food corporations concerned about their image in climate-conscious markets yet keen on continued expansion. And they can increasingly count on government support. The UK's Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC), for example, writes in a document explaining why it will fund the 'Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes' (ISFL), launched by the World Bank in 2013: *"There is growing interest from the private sector in shifting their supply chain to sustainably produced commodities. This is driven by consumer demand, wanting to avoid negative publicity and concern over security of supply. The Consumer Goods Forum has*

committed to zero deforestation supply chains for beef, soy, palm and pulp/paper by 2020, but needs help from governments to achieve this. This is why we are working together with them and other governments in the Tropical Forests Alliance 2020 (TFA2020). Changes in the private sector in line with these commitments could bring alternative revenue streams to REDD+ countries, which is especially important in the absence of a deep market for carbon credits from forests." (7) The DECC paper shows why zero **net** deforestation is so appealing: It is a concept open to confusion! While the DECC statement suggests a commitment by the Consumer Goods Forum to halting deforestation, the Forum has merely committed to work towards zero **net** deforestation by 2020. That means they could claim to have achieved their goal despite continued destruction of forests as long as their members set up enough industrial tree plantations to arrive at a net balance of zero loss of tree cover!

The Public Relations potential for companies aiming to appear green and yet expand their turn-over is obvious. *"This is exactly the type of initiative that we are delighted to support. We need to find new forms of public?private partnership to address global challenges such as deforestation,"* Paul Polman, the chief executive officer of Anglo?Dutch multinational consumer goods company Unilever said when the World Bank launched the ISFL.

And Unilever is not alone. Christine McGrath, Vice President of External Affairs at Mondele?z International, commented that the company is *"looking forward to working with the World Bank to determine how the BioCF Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes can help contribute to our strategy for sourcing key commodities such as coffee and palm oil from regions where tropical forests are protected."* Alfred Evans, head of Bunge Environmental Markets was equally enthusiastic about the ISFL: *"Bunge is pleased to join the World Bank in discussing the formation of the BioCarbon Fund Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes, a groundbreaking initiative. [...]. This new form of engagement between the public and private sector would be of benefit to all stakeholders. In particular, BioCF will help the commodity industry respond to the growing attention consumers and producers place on sustainability in food supply chains. "*

What neither ISFL nor other REDD+ initiatives will achieve, whether on their own or in combination with certification standards and zero **net** deforestation pledges, is to halt forest loss. And we shouldn't be surprised that they don't because they were never designed to do so, as even staunch REDD supporters like Ecosystem Marketplace have pointed out in relation to REDD+: REDD is no more than a financing mechanism **that might help people who wanted to save the forest**. No more than that, *"because anyone who responded to purely economic incentives would opt for palm oil"*, or soy or beef or eucalyptus or sugar cane.

If, however, the objective is to halt deforestation and to strengthen forest peoples' rights, it is time to move beyond certification, end the REDD+ experiment and replace these bright shining lies of the sustainability movement with real commitments to end the destruction of forests. That would involve not only a commitment to ending expansion of industrial agriculture and restoration of areas already destroyed by large-scale monoculture plantations and industrial cattle ranching but also a commitment to leaving oil in the soil and coal and natural gas in their underground deposits. Sadly, the upcoming UN climate summit in Paris will not likely be the place where such commitments will be debated.

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For further information, see also: WRM (2014): *REDD moves from forests to landscapes: More of the same, just bigger and with bigger risk to cause harm*. http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/REDD_moves_from_forests_to_landscapes.pdf

(1) Scott Poynton (2015): *Beyond Certification*. <http://www.dosustainability.com/shop/beyond-certification-p-64.html?zenid=fec4487347616f9f1a6034f63b8309d0> and REDD Monitor article about the book:

<http://www.redd-monitor.org/2015/10/20/scott-poynton-certification-isnt-working-and-is-in-fact-part-of-the-problem/>

(2) For WRM publications and other materials about the problems with voluntary certification standards like FSC and RSPO, see <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/international-processes-and-actors/fsc/>

(3) Steve Zwick (2014): *Todd Lemons: Ecosystem Entrepreneur*. <http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/articles/todd-lemons-ecosystem-entrepreneur/>

(4) <http://www.palmoilpledge.id/>

(5) http://www.simedarby.com/upload/Sustainable_Palm_Oil_Manifesto.pdf

(6) <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/06/13/opinion/021a1eco>

(7) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305241/ICF_BC_for_DECC_investment_in_BioCF_and_FCPF_CF.pdf