The CBD and the Need to Conserve Real Forests, Not Fake Forests

The main threat to the world's forests is not that they will all be cut in the coming decades. There is an even larger threat; that the last tracks of rich, beautiful, vibrant biologically diverse primary forests that still exist on this planet will all be replaced by ugly, biodiversity-poor and empty rows of monoculture tree plantations. This is one of the main conclusions that could be drawn from the information in the latest State of the World's Forest report that was published by the FAO in 2007; that the trend to replace biologically diverse forests with tree monocultures is continuing, and it is even accelerating. Every day, thousands of hectares of biologically diverse forests, are being replaced by monocultures of Oilpalm, Eucalypt, Pine, and even genetically modified trees. Some of this replacement is direct, but the most threatening replacement is indirect: large tracks of primary forests continue to be lost in continents like South America and Africa, while especially China has embarked on an environmentally disastrous exercise of planting thousands of hectares of tree monocultures. The fact that China is the only country that is planting genetically modified trees on a large scale makes this replacement even more devastating from an ecological point of view (see WRM Bulletin Nº 88).

Other global initiatives, like so-called "reforestation" and "afforestation" projects financed through the carbon market and the 1 billion tree campaign of the UN Environment Program are equally ill-adviced. By including large-scale monocultures of exotic, often invasive, species in these efforts these initiatives are not only impacting negatively on biodiversity and people. They also present a tremendous missed chance in terms of not ensuring that "reforestation" efforts are what the term pretends: the REintroduction and REstoration of real forests as a home to people and spectacular biodiversity.

Real forests provide a home to millions of people, and a source of livelihood for billions of people, while monoculture tree plantations are an extremely labour-extensive form of land use causing rural unemployment, depopulation and poverty, especially amongst women. Real forests are home to an estimated 60% of terrestrial biodiversity, while tree plantations devastate biologically diverse ecosystems, pollute waterstreams with agrotoxics and often contribute to carbon emissions by destroying soils.

If there is one institution that should be truly concerned about the world-wide violation of the term "forests" that has taken place since FAO and the Parties to the Climate Convention adopted a definition of forests that includes any combination of trees, it is the Convention on Biodiversity. With the FAO definition, "reforestation" can have tremendous negative impacts on biodiversity, while "deforestation" can actually benefit biodiversity: cutting large areas of exotic pine plantations in countries like the Netherlands would greatly benefit the restoration of native biodiversity.

Happily, as part of the review of its expanded work program on forest biodiversity, the Convention on Biodiversity now has a chance to put forests and biodiversity in harmony again. The Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Forest Biodiversity has proposed that the Conference of the Parties adopts a harmonized, global definition of forests. The upcoming 13th meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice of the CBD, which will take place in Rome in

February, is supposed to elaborate this recommendation. A globally harmonized definition is more urgent than ever now that the Parties to the Climate Convention will be actively debating the role of forests in mitigating climate change as part of the Bali Roadmap. It should be ensured any policies and incentives to conserve forests benefit real forests, not socially and environmentally devastating tree monocultures.

So the need to adopt a global, legal definition of forests that matches the sense of the general public in terms of forests being a biologically diverse, precious and beautiful ecosystem is not just a matter of semantics. It is a matter of educating our children, the public, and policy-makers about what forests really are, and what we will loose if we replace them by any kind of trees.

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