
High Conservation Values: to get or not involved?

Whenever a new process begins, NGOs need to decide on whether to get or not involved in it. Such is now the case with the High Conservation Value (HCV) approach and with the HCV Resource Network.

The editorial above highlights a number of major issues which need to be further discussed in order to make an informed decision regarding engaging –or not- in this.

The first issue raised is that there are two major –and opposite- approaches for private sector control: self-regulation and mandatory state controls. The WRM demands mandatory controls, corporate accountability, rule of law and improved state capacity to regulate the private sector, while corporations promote voluntary standards and codes of conduct. Reality is showing that the latter approach is currently prevailing. The HCV must be seen as part of this approach.

There is therefore a need for a discussion about the benefits and drawbacks that may derive from participating in this arena and about the possibility and/or advisability of the future incorporation of HCV to country legislation to make it mandatory.

A second important issue raised in the editorial is the risk that when an area is deemed not to contain HCV then it may be logged, mined or converted to other activities. This is a very real risk and NGOs participating in this arena may eventually become involuntary responsible for social and environmental degradation in non-HCV areas.

Coupled with the above, is the also very real threat about the “nightmare scenario” of islands of ‘high conservation value’ being surrounded by devastated ‘sacrifice zones’. This is actually common practice in many countries, where governments open up large tracts of land for unsustainable productive activities and justify this by declaring other areas as “protected”. The HCV approach may further strengthen such policies.

The above implies another discussion about how any part of nature or society can be considered as having “low” conservation value –by default, everything not defined as “high” will be “low”- and if anyone has the right to define categories such as those.

There is also the issue about how this tool is being applied, about who’s interests it serves better and about guarantees regarding the respect for communities’ rights in decisions about land use.

Another crucial issue is time. How much of their time should NGO activists dedicate to every process that comes up –and keep coming up? How many millions of working hours have processes such as the World Bank Forest Policy Review, the Intergovernmental Panel and Forum on Forests, the Forest Stewardship Council and many others consumed? How much of that effort has been useful for forest communities? Would it not be wiser to focus on our own agendas –for instance community forests- instead of reacting to government and corporate initiatives?

In relation to that, this new process –the HCV- and its related HCV Resource Network, are demanding time and resources to debate challenges such as the above –and others- and to find ways of overcoming them –as the editorial says- “within the voluntary, business-friendly context preferred by corporations” –with almost limitless financial resources at their disposal.

As with many other processes, decisions need to be made regarding this new one: why organizations should -or should not- become involved, how much time and resources–if any- should be dedicated to it, if to try to influence it from inside or from outside -or to ignore it. But we must all bear in mind that the process exists and that we need to be aware about its possible consequences.

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