FAO’s net loss in credibility over global forest resources assessment

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently published its “Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005”. The accompanying press release begins with the worrying statement, “Deforestation continues at an alarming rate”, but we are immediately reassured by the second line which states: “But net forest loss [is] slowing down”. This may perhaps be slightly cryptic to many. We might ask the obvious question: how can forest loss be slowing down when deforestation rates continue being alarming? That, of course, would miss the subtlety of the FAO experts. They did not say that forest loss was slowing down. They said NET forest loss is slowing down.

Rainforest Foundation produced a critical report to coincide with the FAO’s 2005 Global Forest Resources Assessment. In their report, Rainforest Foundation points out that “Using FAO’s definition of forest, monoculture plantations, highly degraded forests and even clear-cut areas ‘expected’ to regenerate, are all counted as forests. Consequently, the FAO data obscure our understanding of the world’s forests, and seriously underestimate the extent of their degradation.”

One good thing about the FAO is that it repeats itself. We can simply go back to the April 2001 editorial of the WRM bulletin and repeat exactly the same analysis we made on its year 2000 Global Forest Resources Assessment. Back then, we summarized the report by saying that “The main message of the FAO's assessment is that the situation has improved compared to previous global forest surveys. Current deforestation is described as happening at ‘a significantly lower NET rate compared to FAO's previous report for the period 1990-1995’, and adds that ‘NET deforestation has likely decreased since the 1980s at the global level’.”

The wording is slightly different in 2000 and 2005, but the message is exactly the same: NET forest loss is decreasing. So let’s go back to the 2001 editorial to see how the FAO managed then --and now-- to make mission impossible possible:

1) By changing the definition of forests. In its previous definition, a 20% canopy cover was necessary for defining an area as forest. The FAO decreased it to 10 percent canopy cover, thereby largely increasing --on paper-- the world’s forest area.

2) By not including logging as deforestation. According to the FAO, “by definition, logging does not in itself result in deforestation, if the forest is allowed to regenerate.” While they are regenerating they are still considered to be forests and defined as “temporarily unstocked areas.” This means that a country may have logged most of its forest, but --unless it converts the area to other activities-- it will appear as having the same forest area as before.

3) By including even further types of plantations as forests --such as rubber tree plantations-- which were not included in previous FAO assessments and thus artificially increasing the "forest" area.

4) By continuing to include tree plantations as “forests” in the FAO definition. This is in fact the key issue for enabling the FAO to reach the conclusion that “net forest loss is slowing down”. Given that any plantation is considered to be a forest, this implies that if, for instance, 1 million hectares of

eucalyptus plantations are established in one country while at the same time 1 million hectares of forests are destroyed in the same country, the NET forest loss will be nil and the “forest” area will appear as not having changed at all.

Mission impossible thus becomes possible. The only problem is, of course, that it is untrue. Forests --and particularly tropical forests-- continue to disappear “at an alarming rate”. Monoculture tree plantations are not forests and are taking over entire landscapes at an equally “alarming rate”. Clearcut forests are no longer forests. Manipulating data will hide but certainly not solve the problem. The NET loss in credibility of the FAO as the UN expert body of forests is now total.

It is up to the FAO itself to either substantially change its assessment methodologies to produce realistic and useful reports on the world’s forests or to continue playing the sad role it is now playing. We will support the achievement of the former while continuing to oppose strongly the latter.