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## The World Parks Congress: Doubts and Hopes

September 2003 is a crucial month for the global environment movement. During September, global trade talks under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation are to be held in Cancun, Mexico. Social and environmental organisations plan sharp protests against the way the Bretton Woods organisations are still pushing the world headlong down a slide towards unregulated markets, international trade without equity and liberalization without restraint. Without checks and balances, without simultaneous improvements in governance, environmental regulation and empowerment of local communities, such a process can only result in greater poverty and environmental ruin.

At the end of September, also, the FAO is convening the World Forestry Congress in Quebec City, where NGOs and IPOs will bring up the social and environmental problems resulting from the prevailing forestry model, based on industrial scale logging operations and on the promotion of large-scale tree monocultures, both aimed at feeding the “global market” while destroying forests and forest peoples’ livelihoods. At the same time, NGO and IPO participants will actively promote the more socially equitable and environmentally friendly approach of community forest management.

Earlier the same month, the World Parks Congress is also to be held in Durban, South Africa. Surely, here, there will be less reason for gloom about the socially and environmentally destructive impositions of the neo-liberal agenda? Well, maybe. True, the focus of the Congress is to be on ‘Benefits Beyond Boundaries’ – implying that conservationists are seeking to emphasise that protected areas must be designed to bring benefits to, instead of just impose restrictions on, nearby residents. True, a major cross-cutting issue for the Congress will be the ‘Theme of Indigenous and Local Communities, Equity and Protected Areas’ (TILCEPA).

But serious doubts are surfacing about the overall strategy of some of the major conservation agencies: do they really stand for ecological justice, restitution of rights and safeguarding the environment or are they engaged in a Pact with the Devil, cutting deals with transnational corporations and development banks, trading parks and budgets in exchange for turning a blind eye to environmental ruin outside parks? Will they stand up against mining in protected areas, protected forests and indigenous territories? Do they oppose an unfair globalization process, or are they crafting ‘win-win scenarios’ where the profits of this trade are channelled into their growing empire of protected areas, while restive locals are bought off with short-term ‘community development’ and ‘co-management’ projects? Will the end result of this Faustian Pact be a planet in which 10% is set aside as ‘wilderness’ for recreation, while the other 90% is sacrificed to the neo-liberal agenda? Are parks and ‘development’ just two sides of the same coin? In short, are the conservation agencies part of the problem or the solution?

If the World Parks Congress is to be judged a success by the environmental movement these doubts must be convincingly allayed. The Congress must come out with a vision, and a strategy to match, which recognises that parks are for people, where rights are respected, where indigenous peoples regain control of their territories and destinies, which are no-go areas for extractive industries. No more stitch ups with the corporations that are driving the world to ruin. No more colonial deals trading other peoples’ territories and destinies for land use plans, which include parks, logging, oil-pipelines

and plantations.

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