
[Aotearoa/New Zealand: Meeting the CBD obligations and the need for a definition of what is not a forest](#)

In all of the debate over what is (or is not) a forest, the issue of an individual country's commitment to the Convention on Biological diversity (CBD) has been overlooked by many. We need to remember that in signing and ratifying their commitment to the CBD, countries commit to increasing their forest cover as a measure of protecting biodiversity. The Global Forest Coalition produced a report on several countries' commitment to the CBD which was presented at the sixth Conference of the Parties in The Hague. This report made several countries look very good, in particular, developed nations. The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and New Zealand especially looked very good. While this article freely admits that these countries have made significant contributions to the international environmental debate and the protection of biodiversity, they are a long way from perfect and this needs to be borne in mind when analyzing their contribution.

Aotearoa (New Zealand), for example has been very active in several fora in pushing for the adoption of plantations as a mechanism for absorbing carbon emissions. Leaving aside the scientific debate over whether the theory of sinks is good, bad or indifferent science, we need to ask what else would the adoption of sinks impact on in terms of international agreements signed (and ratified). Aotearoa has undertaken, as part of its commitment to the CBD to increase its forest cover, yet an analysis of the state of New Zealand's forests will show you that the level of indigenous forests (overall) has been relatively stable for more than 30 years. How then can the country meet its commitment to the CBD? Well, a quick look at the Ministry of the Environment's webpage (with figures courtesy of the Ministry of statistics) shows one possible answer.

Approximately 23% of the total landmass is in Indigenous forest cover, not all of it old growth by any stretch of the imagination, way short of New Zealand's commitment to the CBD. 6.6% of total land mass is in monocultural production plantation (90% of which is *Pinus radiata*). This is an old and acknowledged debate, which New Zealand has never tried to hide. Successive governments of all persuasions have been adamant that the country's timber production areas constitute forests. However, the combination of these two figures still leaves the country short of its commitment to the CBD. Yet, the web page shows that New Zealand's forest cover is 40%, past its CBD target. A further study of the figures shows that 10.2% of the country's land mass is in scrubland and that this has now been included under forest cover, something that had not happened at the time of the Climate conference in The Hague.

I am a very proud New Zealander and a supporter of the current government, and I do not mean to imply that there is any deliberate malice in this shifting of the figures. Any government has a duty to not only protect the environment but also to ensure a healthy economy to provide the social benefits the people demand. To me, this fudging of the figures on New Zealand's forest cover is indicative of the debate over a definition of what exactly a forest is (or is not).

If a universally accepted definition included any of the following,

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- 1) A forest is Indigenous by definition
 - 2) A forest requires a mix of species
 - 3) A forest requires some level of mature tree percentage and canopy,

then New Zealand would have 23% (or less) forest cover and would be far short of its commitment to the CBD.

It is my belief that we need an internationally agreed definition of a forest that includes, as a minimum, the above three items. If this means that some countries will therefore require more time to meet their commitments to the CBD, then that is a reality we will all have to live with. At least the figures we will be discussing will be more accurate and reflective of forest biodiversity. In order to achieve commitments to conservation we are going to have to address issues of demand and over consumption, biodiversity erosion through invasive and introduced species. Any incentive system offered by governments must be for biodiversity conservation as a primary focus and we must avoid the overuse of perverse incentives because of their potential for negative impact on biodiversity.