
The FAO forest assessment: Concealing the truth

The FAO recently presented the results of its Global Forest Resources Assessment 2000, which it characterises as being "the most comprehensive, reliable and authoritative baseline survey of forest resources to date". But the main question is: is it useful?

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." So it appears that the situation is --at long last!-- improving. But when one takes a closer look at the study, it becomes clear that the situation has not improved at all, and that those conclusions result from manipulating the data in different ways:

1) By changing the definition of forests. The study itself is self explanatory on this in the case of Australia, whose forest area now appears to have increased from 41 million hectares in 1995 to 150 million hectares in the year 2000! The reason is that "the dramatic increase of over 115 million hectares of forest is a consequence of the application of a 10 percent canopy cover threshold for defining forest, as opposed to the 20 percent threshold used for industrialized countries in previous assessments." The forest area has thus not necessarily increased --it may have even decreased-- but the change in definition has made it to appear much larger than before.

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 productive activities-- it will appear as having the same forest area as before.

3) By continuing to include plantations as "forests" in the FAO definition. This allows the study to show "reductions in net deforestation", but which are "mainly due to significant increases in forest plantations and the succession of forests on abandoned agricultural lands." According to the study, the current annual rate of plantation establishment is 4.5 million hectares worldwide, which means that the same area of forests may disappear annually, but the "forest" area will appear as not having changed at all.

4) 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.

But even with all those manipulations, the FAO has to recognize that "net deforestation rates were highest in Africa and South America, whereas afforestation through forest plantations, significantly offset the loss of forests in Asia". Which means that if plantations were to be considered as what they are --tree crops and not forests-- the picture in those three continents would show that the situation has either not improved or has further deteriorated.

In spite of all the above, everyone knows that few countries --if any-- can say that none of their primary forests have been degraded and that secondary forests are being allowed to regrow. Everyone knows that monoculture tree plantations have nothing in common with forests. Everyone knows that --among other-- the Amazon forest, the Central African forest and the East and Southeast Asian forests are being destroyed at at least the same rate as before.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, the FAO is sending out the wrong messages. It is suggesting that deforestation is slowing down, which according to its own data is not true. It is telling governments that they can log all their forests, which will only be considered to be "temporarily unstocked." It is approving the substitution of forests and grasslands by monoculture tree plantations, which will "offset net deforestation." It is artificially increasing the forest area of industrialized countries by simply changing a definition. It is completely ignoring the issue of forest degradation.

The world needs to know the truth about the real state of the forests. Not as an academic exercise but as a tool to adopt and implement policies to ensure the conservation of its imperiled forests. Unfortunately, the FAO has missed the opportunity to provide the world with such tool.