
Carbon sinks or the sinking of the Climate Change Convention?

Northern countries, which are responsible for most of the world fossil fuel-related emissions resulting from their unsustainable production and consumption patterns, are seeking to buy a way out of their responsibility in relation to global warming by promoting the use of the photosynthetic activity of tree leaves to take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. Fast-growing species plantations have been given a major role in relation to this issue because of their supposed condition of carbon sinks. Under the so-called Clean Development Mechanisms, the Kyoto Protocol promotes such plantations. The result is that the North will continue emitting CO₂ to the atmosphere, while vast areas of the South will be used as a deposit for their carbon garbage. Estimates of the area of fast-growing tree plantations required to absorb global emissions of CO₂ range from 150 to 300 million hectares. The negative environmental and social impacts of this invasion can be enormous.

Plantations are not a solution for global warming, but an additional problem. As a matter of fact, tree plantations are one of the main causes of forest destruction in the tropics, eliminating the enormous carbon reservoirs that mature forests are. In the 1980s, 75% of the new tree plantations in Southern countries in the tropics were made by replacing closed natural forest that had existed there ten years earlier. In the temperate regions, plantations will substitute grasslands that also act as natural carbon reservoirs. Additionally, the scientific basis of the whole idea is very weak. The efficiency of plantations as carbon sinks is under question because it depends very much on the species used and on the local climatic conditions; because it is not clear for how long they are supposed to stay as carbon sinks; and because it depends on what happens with carbon emissions when they are cut down and their wood is transformed into different types of wood products which will decay in relatively short periods of time (particularly so in the case of paper).

A real solution for global warming would imply -among other additional measures- that industrialized countries effectively diminish their emissions and that, at the same time, primary forests and grassland ecosystems are maintained as natural carbon reservoirs, while secondary forest regrowth is enhanced to act as real carbon sinks. That should be the role of the CCC. If it continues concentrating on sinks and not on sources, then it will be the CCC itself that will sink.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Organizations working at the Climate Change Convention level:
 - Challenge the idea of plantations as carbon sinks
 - Point out that such solution is contradictory with the mandate of the CBD

- Organizations working at the national level:
 - Include in your agenda the issue of the promotion of plantations as carbon sinks
 - Identify if there are plans to implement plantations as carbon sinks or if they have already been implemented
 - If such plans exist, disseminate information on them and on their possible negative impacts

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- Influence your country's government office dealing with the CCC process on this issue
 - Identify government officials participating directly in the CCC events and try to influence them on the issue