
Japanese foresters invade China

In the imperial times Japan invaded China to expand its power in the Far East. Nowadays, when war time in that region is over, a new kind of invasion is up to affect the Chinese territory: that of tree plantations associated to the Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM) under the Kyoto Protocol.

Twenty-five Japanese companies want to initiate a major afforestation programme in China, in a bid to secure greater quotas for emitting carbon dioxide. The Japanese industry is one of the most important contributors to global warming through its emissions of greenhouse gases –mainly carbon dioxide- to the atmosphere. Instead of trying to develop environmentally friendly technologies and collaborating to stop the consumerism that characterizes modern Japanese society, the powerful industrial lobby seems to have found a way out: <the planting of extensive tree monocultures in foreign countries.

Takashi Imai, chairman of the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren), proposed the project to Chinese President Jiang Zemin when he recently visited Japan. The project is presented under the guise of restoring forest resources destroyed by an extensive flood. The companies have already set up a task force to determine locations, scale and a schedule, and will ask the Japanese government to help fund the plan from official development assistance earmarked for “environmental” projects. By means of its international “cooperation” agency –JICA- Japan has been promoting the large-scale fast-growing species plantation model in several Southern countries.

Oji Paper Co. and Sumitomo Forestry Co. will provide technology. Ebara Corp., Nippon Steel Corp., Tokyo Electric Power Co., Obayashi Corp., Komatsu Ltd. and Mitsubishi Corp. are the main participants in the group that will undertake the project.

The planned afforestation of 100,000 hectares would absorb an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 tons of carbon dioxide per year, equivalent to 6-7% of the total release by Japan's paper industry in fiscal 1997. The companies hope this project will offset some of the 6% cut in emissions (from 1990 levels) Japan is required to achieve by 2010. According to the involved firms it would be very difficult to achieve this target on a domestic basis alone.

Even without considering the negative environmental and social effects of large-scale tree plantations at the local and regional levels, their utility to diminish carbon dioxide in the air has got very weak scientific basis. From a political and social point of view, the solution to global warming cannot be left in the hands of the same agents that have contributed historically to it. Instead of facing the problem with a realistic approach –that would lead to the enhancement of sustainable forest management, the promotion of the growth of secondary forests and the respect to the communities and indigenous people that live in/on the forests- Northern governments and transnationals are now only trying to “green” their image, while acting under the principle: we emit, you sink. Meanwhile global warming continues to increase.

Sources: Nihon Keizai, Inside China Daily, 25/11/1998. “Japan eyes forestation in China”.
Comments: WRM International Secretariat.

