

# **How forest policies and agencies promote sustainable destruction**

WRM Briefing

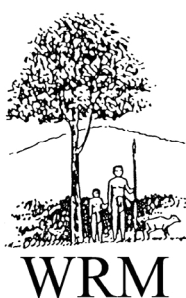
## **How forest policies and agencies promote sustainable destruction**

### WRM Briefing



This briefing is based on a longer discussion paper produced in the period 2019-2021 by Larry Lohmann, member of WRM's advisory committee, based on inputs from interviews with several grassroots activists, the WRM advisory committee and the international secretariat. The discussion paper is a critical self-reflection of WRM on its past, present and future work around forests, deforestation and its participation in international forest policy processes, fora and initiatives. The paper can be accessed [here](#).

World Rainforest Movement

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## How forest policies and agencies promote sustainable destruction

**More than 20 years ago, a large group of NGOs participated in a collaborative project with the United Nations Intergovernmental Forum of Forests (IFF). The project aspired to revisit and document in fresh detail what the real, underlying causes of forest degradation were. The analysis published in 1999 is still very relevant. None of the underlying causes identified then have been genuinely addressed; many of them have even been reinforced.**

Back in the 1980s, one of WRM's main priorities - and one of the main reasons for founding the organisation in 1986 - was to challenge false understandings of the causes of deforestation then being propounded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Resources Institute and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO).

In 1985, FAO and the international agencies mentioned above formulated the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP). Above all, TFAP set out to promote national forestry plans to expand industrial tree monoculture plantations, which FAO euphemistically referred to as "reforestation". TFAP failed spectacularly. Like countless international forest policy initiatives since, TFAP not just failed, it also failed to even mention, much less attempt to really understand or address, the full range of underlying causes of forest destruction.

The underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation - different from the more visible direct causes such as logging, agribusiness or mining - tend to be hidden from view, less discussed and poorly understood. They are closely tied to the capitalist-racist-patriarchal system, and also related to the colonial legacy. Examples include the non-recognition of the territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent communities; centralized control over forest facilitating the advance of both destructive and "nature conservation" activities; and macro-economic policies, just to mention a few. The FAO forest definition, as well as the top-down global forest policies that are based on this definition, are also underlying causes of forest destruction.

## The FAO forest definition

For many years already, FAO reduces a forest to any area covered by trees. In doing so, FAO discards other life-forms as well as the biological, cyclical and cultural diversity that define a forest in its continuous interconnection with forest-dependent communities. What's worse, FAO's reductionist definition also allows the corporate sector behind tens of millions of fast-growing industrial tree plantations to claim their monocultures are "planted forests". Countries' forest statistics thus count these industrial monocultures as "forests", in spite of the well-documented social and environmental

impacts such plantations have caused around the world. An additional problem is that many other national and international agencies and processes that produce forest policies, such as the UNFCCC and CBD, as well as the European Union, use the FAO definition as a reference. Thus, they too consider that chopping down a forest in the Amazon, in the DR Congo or in Papua to set up a monoculture tree plantation does not count as deforestation. As a result, FAO's forest definition is in itself an underlying cause of deforestation.

Overall, at the time of TFAP, FAO and other international actors tended to attribute forest loss to forest-dependent communities, not corporations and states. False explanations included "slash and burn agriculture," "overpopulation," "illegal smallholder encroachment," "firewood collection," "peasant ignorance," "human activities," "insufficient privatization," "insufficient free trade," "insufficient police," "insufficient protected areas," "not enough commercial plantations," "not enough corporate involvement," "incorrect prices for forest products and services," "not enough high-tech, capital-intensive agriculture," and so forth.

Such explanations were useful for reinforcing the power and position of many states, corporations, and UN agencies, as they could continue profiting with the same destructive economic model. Propagating them also helped many academics, bureaucrats and NGOs to maintain their prestige and connections, attract patronage and funding for working with forest-dependent communities, and avoid being vilified by power-holders.

On the whole, however, they had a harmful effect on forests and forest-

dependent peoples, because they reinforced and at the same time concealed the main threats that had to be addressed.

In this context, a large group of NGOs, WRM included, decided in 1997 to participate in a collaborative project with the United Nations Intergovernmental Forum of Forests (IFF). The project aspired to revisit and document in fresh detail what the real, underlying causes of forest degradation were. The result was a 145-page document published in April 1999, entitled *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation: Case Studies, Analysis and Policy Recommendations*.<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the causes identified in this exercise were quite different from the false explanations UN institutions like FAO and the World Bank had been propagating.

From today's perspective, what is perhaps most striking about this project is how relevant its analysis remains. None of the underlying causes that the 1999 document identified have been genuinely addressed. They all remain as significant today as they were then.

For example:

- The territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples and other defenders of forests are still not adequately recognized. In some cases, these rights have been transformed into commodities with a price, so that forest defenders can be rewarded in the market if they forego them.
- Discrimination against forest-dependent peoples has continued, often in the form of what today is more likely to be referred to as *criminalization*. This criminalization of forest-dependent peoples is accompanied by a trend toward *decriminalization* of many destructive corporate activities in forests.
- Corporate-state alliances continue to drive deforestation. Governments are still promoting destructive colonization schemes, and the law, including land rights law, is still being used as a frontier weapon to grab forest-related resources. In Indonesia, for example, overlapping state-granted mining and land concessions can now cover well over 100 per cent of a province's territory, or the major part or the whole of an island. Aggressive state-led programmes to open more forest areas to commercial development are

in evidence from India to Brazil, where Amazon deforestation increased in the past few years to the highest rates since 2008, according to the government's own figures.

- Militarized methods of centralizing control over forests are still being employed, whether by states, by global corporations, by NGOs, or by all three.
- Agribusiness is at least as destructive as it was more than 20 years ago, probably more so.
- Big development or infrastructure projects such as dams, roads and mining and oil-extraction schemes continue to take their toll. They are often now integrated into giant infrastructure "corridors" bringing together extraction, transport, energy, labour, manufacturing and ecosystem service market projects<sup>2</sup>.
- State regulation and standard "nature conservation" continue to be at least as big a problem for forests as lack of regulation or lack of "conservation." Forest peoples continue to be harassed and dispossessed for official protected areas, while many forest lands nominally under state protection are leased out to private logging, mining or plantation contractors.
- Impoverishment and disempowerment of forest defenders continue to undermine forest protection.
- Investment patterns, debt, macroeconomic policies, global commodity flows and trade relations continue to play central roles in deforestation around the world.

This does not mean that nothing has changed. In some ways, the world has moved on. But on the whole, **the underlying causes identified in 1999 have only been reinforced.**

Ironically, what has perhaps reinforced underlying causes the most is the way they have been expanded and repackaged to show off new, supposedly "green," "democratic" or "participatory" dimensions, including the following:

- Forest-destroying plantations aimed at production of edible oil, sugar or paper pulp have been increasingly supplemented by forest-destroying “bioenergy” plantations supplying fuels for electricity, aviation or automotive industries – fuels that are advertised as being “greener” than oil, coal or gas. Because huge volumes of wood and other biotic materials are required to generate the same amount of energy as fossil fuels, the impact on forests is immense and growing. In addition, wood fuels also generate more net carbon dioxide emissions than the fossil fuels that they replace, at least during the crucial first decades of the changeover.<sup>3</sup>

- Control over forest land is now being centralized not only in order to facilitate maximum production of wood, minerals or hydropower, to enable nature tourism, or to advance “nature conservation.” It is also being centralized to secure as much of the biosphere’s carbon-cycling capacity as possible to “offset” emissions<sup>4</sup> from fossil-fuelled industries and transport. In the more than two decades since the Addressing the Underlying Causes report, these emissions – which offsets are designed to perpetuate – have themselves been increasingly identified as a major cause of forest destruction.<sup>5</sup> Yet, offset policies<sup>6</sup> are structured in a way that is bound to undermine existing relationships between local communities and their land. Ironically, it is precisely these relationships that have preserved hundreds of forests for hundreds of years. Such offset policies seldom if ever provide communities themselves with enough income to compensate for their loss of the types of access to forests that they need. Nevertheless, the push to use offsets for “compensating” companies’ emissions has come to dominate international forest policy discussions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

- Many forest lands are also being centrally reorganized in order to “compensate” for forest destruction elsewhere. Accompanying and licensing forest-destroying commercial projects in India, for example, are official “compensatory afforestation” (plantation) schemes<sup>8</sup> that not only dispossess forest-dependent peoples but also themselves tend to degrade forests. The reorganization of local people’s forest lands as “biodiversity offsets” in countries such as Madagascar, meanwhile, is not only offered as an excuse for biodiversity depletion elsewhere, but itself becomes an additional cause of social and environmental degradation.<sup>9</sup>

- Mainstream conservation policies that have forcibly separated Indigenous Peoples and peasants from forests – with many devastating environmental and social effects – are now being strengthened and extended with the help of post-2000 ideologies like “Nature Based Solutions”<sup>10</sup> as well as ambitious schemes that are recruiting public support for professional, bureaucratic “protection and restoration” of 30 or even 50 per cent of the earth’s lands and oceans.<sup>11</sup> Many of the same colonialist institutions that were responsible for the forest damage done by traditional “forests-without-people” conservation are positioning themselves to move into this new space, often in alliance with large business interests.

- New labels and procedures aimed at giving old agents of deforestation a greener or more democratic cachet have proliferated. The 20th-century certification bureaucracy known as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (established in 1993), advertised as capable of making industrial forest extraction environmentally friendly, has now been joined by many similar initiatives such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (2003). Like the FSC, the RSPO has been thoroughly discredited by research from WRM and other organizations.<sup>12</sup> Yet there is also now a Round Table for Sustainable Soy (RTSS) (2006); a Roundtable for a Sustainable Cocoa Economy (2007); a “Better Sugar Cane Initiative” called Bonsucro (2008); a Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (2018); as well as a 400-member Consumer Goods Forum (2009) promoting “zero-net deforestation” by 2020 in beef, soy, palm oil, pulp and paper supply chains; a Sustainability Consortium (2007) that is supposed to document how well its several dozen corporate members are avoiding high conservation-value or high carbon-stock areas in their own supply chains; and countless other bodies aimed at reassuring the public about the forest conservation credentials of companies like Unilever, Cargill, Walmart and Starbucks. None of these coalitions are designed in a way that could interrupt the dynamic of forest destruction on which their corporate patrons depend for profitability.

- Initiatives embraced by state and international organizations that claim to render less virulent some of the old underlying causes of deforestation have often merely extended the life of forest-destroying mechanisms. In late 20th-century India, Joint Forest Management schemes to give local



communities a voice in forest care generally failed to check the destructive commitments of corporations and the state. So too, the post-2000 imposition of the formal duty on states to obtain the Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples to development projects on their territories has been met, very often, with creative evasions. These evasions allow many forest-destroying projects to go forward pretty much as before, only with a new “participatory” patina. As Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos of the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores y Trabalhadoras Rurais (Union of Rural Workers) of Santarém notes, that ends up giving forest movements a new task: how to resist the official enclosure of “participation” within the framework of FPIC while reaffirming movements’ own procedures for deciding what participation is.

- The state has also learned to permeate the grassroots in other new ways that help perpetuate deforestation. One example noted by Indian activist and researcher Soumitra Ghosh, who works in West Bengal, is micro-finance, which extends innovative forms of debt and debt collection to new classes of impoverished villagers. In such ways, Ghosh points out, the grassroots itself is being “constantly made, unmade and remade” in ways that pose new threats to forests.

- The carbon offsets industry meanwhile continually sprouts its own labels that claim its damaging products are in fact benign. Examples include the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (CCBS - 2005), the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS - 2007) and the Guidelines on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC - 2013) of the United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD). Another example is the California Tropical Forest Standard (2019) that will be used by California’s carbon offset programme if the state decides to compensate for the state’s industrial emissions by purchasing rights to the carbon sequestration capabilities of forests in other countries. None of the standard-setting bodies involved admit that carbon offsets are themselves an underlying cause of deforestation. Rather, they simply assume, without evidence that they are not.

- Much-hyped new “green economy” policies tend to work in the same destructive ways as – and also tend to reinforce – old “non-green” policies,

only in disguised ways that often make them more difficult to criticize. That is the case for the Brazilian state of Acre, a “green economy laboratory” celebrated by the World Bank, the German government and many others. Acre’s “green economy” exploits workers and undermines their subsistence to achieve its stated goal of “storing carbon” rather than respect and facilitate their ways of living in and with the forest on their own terms.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Acre’s “green economy” tends to leave untouched highly-damaging forest encroachment by large commercial interests – including loggers, cattle ranchers and plantation firms.

- A post-2000 “digital economy” that promised to make obsolete some of the dynamics driving deforestation has instead augmented them. More pressure is put on forests and forest-dependent communities by the mining industry’s quest for both common and rare minerals to feed the computer industry, electric car batteries, and so forth; by computer-enabled transport and extraction corridors; by new fossil fuel and ‘green energy’ projects to provide the huge new quantities of electricity needed for giant “big data” centres; and by digitalization of agriculture and nature conservation that merely tends to expand the range and scope of corporate resource extraction and state efforts to surveil, harass and repress forest-dependent peoples.<sup>14</sup>

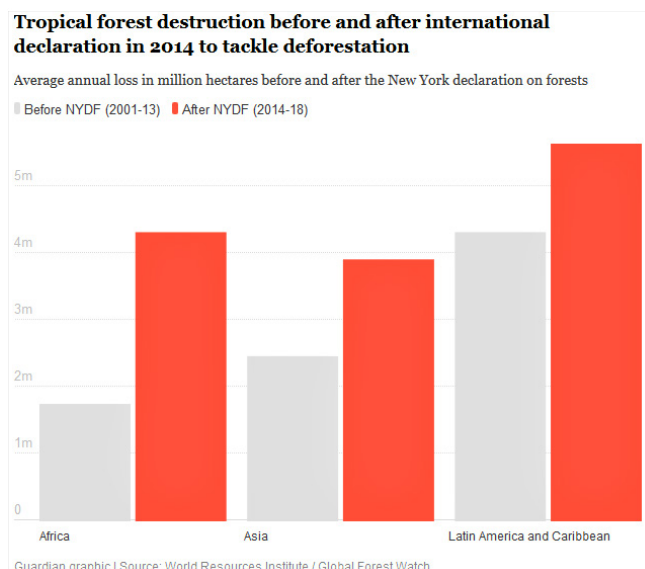
- Increasingly, corporations are trying to contain feminist movements by instituting “gender policies.” For example, the transnational plantation company SOCFIN defends its operations in Sierra Leone by saying that about a quarter of their permanent employees are women. SOCFIN goes on to assert that policies have been established “to protect their work,” and that a “gender committee” has been set up to “discuss women’s issues and grievances”.<sup>15</sup> In large part, however, such measures merely give a different colouration to an underlying patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> Supposed “new opportunities” for women tend to be restricted to low-paying, arduous and demeaning tasks. Corporate gender policy documents never even raise the question of why physical and sexual violence against women is such a systemic aspect of extractive industry operations worldwide, whether they involve plantations, logging or mining.

- The exploitation of forest labour in general has increased with outsourcing, which saves business costs by making the life conditions of workers (who

are now often relabeled “collaborators,” “independent contractors,” or “partners”) more precarious. This trend reflects the changing structure of the post-2000 world economy, which has seen capital’s profits more dependent on directly “taking” things from workers, land and forests and less on “making” them (manufacturing).

- Environmental economists’ post-2000 efforts to price more and more aspects of nature have tended mainly to reinforce the dynamic that makes forests exchangeable and dispensable and forest loss “compensatable” through mechanisms such as biodiversity offsetting and compensatory afforestation. This often renders the struggles of local peoples against the primary agents of deforestation still more difficult.

Because the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation have, by and large, not been addressed but only reinforced by official initiatives, it is also no surprise that the growing number of abstract promises by governments or international coalitions to do something about the crisis – few of which even mention the underlying causes – are having no effect.



For example, the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF) – backed by the Consumer Goods Forum, the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 and Forest Trends – pledged to cut forest loss in half between 2014 and 2020. Yet in reality, deforestation surged 43 per cent during the period.<sup>17</sup> (See graph at right from The Guardian.)

Other trends suggest that the fundamental mechanisms driving the losses remain untouched. Rates of energy consumption, for example, have nearly doubled since 2010. Despite 25 years of global climate negotiations, greenhouse gas emissions grew at an average 1.6 per cent per year between 2008 and 2017 and “show no signs of peaking.”<sup>18</sup> Annual emissions in 2017

were a record 53.5 gigatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and its “equivalents,” more than double the 2000 figure of 25 gigatonnes.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the ultimate effects of such trends, in addition, cannot be predicted or may turn out to be worse than expected. For example, scientists surprised themselves recently when they found that some 40 per cent of the world’s insect species may go extinct over the next few decades, threatening agriculture and forest regeneration alike.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, it might be argued that official global initiatives to tackle deforestation and forest degradation – as reassuring but pointless gestures – themselves constitute one further cause of forest destruction.

In the 1980s, the TFAP had no research programme for investigating how to confront the political and economic interests involved in commercial and infrastructural expansion into the forests. On the contrary, it sought answers in the logging, plantation and extraction industries themselves, as well as in increased power for repressive state agencies such as military and forestry units. Instead of organizing around the underlying causes of deforestation, it encouraged the very corporate sectors that lay at the root of much of the crisis.

Today, similarly, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has no plan for analyzing or tackling the historical political and economic drivers of fossil fuel extraction and use. On the contrary, it does not study or even mention them. Nor does it cite the name of a single corporation or bureaucracy central to fossil fuel extraction and use.

Even the scientific panel advising the UNFCCC has adopted a methodology that systematically hides the underlying causes of deforestation and climate change.

## Why Climatology is an Underlying Cause of Deforestation

In 1990, scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) started compiling tables showing the quantities of greenhouse gases being emitted “by” each country. Global warming, they decided, was “caused” at the locations where carbon in trees or in coal, oil and gas was transformed into carbon dioxide and released into the air. Responsibility for climate change lay with the governments of the nations inside whose borders these chemical reactions took place.

Ever since, climatologists have been telling the world that it is “unscientific” to blame the bulk of climate change on anything other than carbon atoms “crossing the border” into the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide molecules. The main goal of climate action, they claim, must be for national states to curb the migration of carbon atoms across this border –

and to expel the “excess” carbon that has already migrated into the air.

This ideology has been adopted by nearly everyone who discusses climate change. International climate negotiations do not explore how to confront the fossil-fuelled mechanization of human labour on which today’s corporate profits depend. They do not analyse the relationship between deforestation and oil, coal and gas exploration.

Instead, they talk only about “reducing emissions” of certain kinds of molecules. And they see the state as capable of tackling the problem. That encourages the idea that continuing exploitation of fossil fuels is fine as long as enough trees can be officially appropriated to serve as refuges for surplus carbon atoms repatriated from the atmosphere.

By the same token, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) accounts for the worldwide loss of species, varieties and habitats with the diagram below.<sup>21</sup>

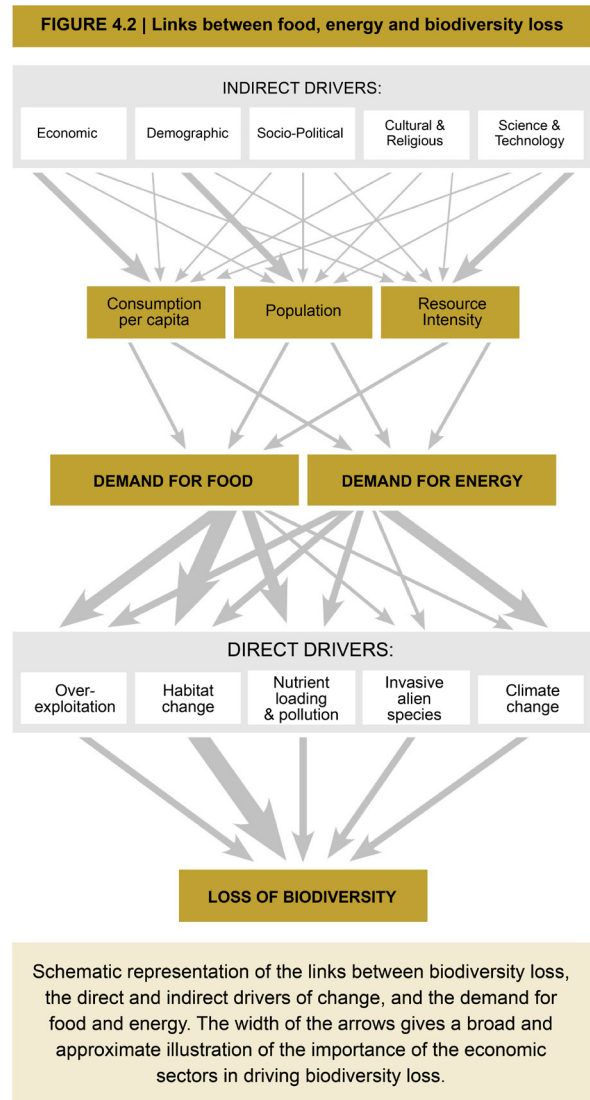
In this diagram, the CBD tells us that disembodied, history-independent, pan-human “demands for food” and “demands for energy” are what lie behind habitat loss and other direct causes of the biodiversity crisis. Driving these causes in turn, according to the CBD, are equally abstract, spectral forces like population growth, economics and “science and technology.”

Not only is this embarrassingly nonsensical account of deforestation and other types of environmental degradation not the same as that of Addressing the Underlying Causes. It profoundly conflicts with it. Were it allowed to, it would get in the way of constructive movement action.

There is no sign that this trend will change.

On 3 December 2019, for instance, the Environment Committee of the European Parliament resolved that there should be “legally binding” biodiversity targets at global and EU levels to ensure that 30 per cent of natural areas are conserved by 2030 and 30 per cent of degraded ecosystems restored. Again, the resolution was accompanied by no serious analysis whatsoever of what was causing biodiversity loss or what might stem the loss. The same is true for the latest 2021 EU initiative for a new regulation with “mandatory rules” to ensure only deforestation-free products from certain supply chains will enter the European market.<sup>22</sup> Both proposals merely endorse more economic growth.

The past two years have seen a staggering number of high-level meetings and international declarations about forest loss that are very similar. On the one hand, they sound the alarm about the crisis. On the other hand, either they have no clue about or just choose to ignore the underlying causes of deforestation and how to address them. Instead, they continue to promote such causes. The resulting policies are not just doomed to fail, they further fuel deforestation.



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