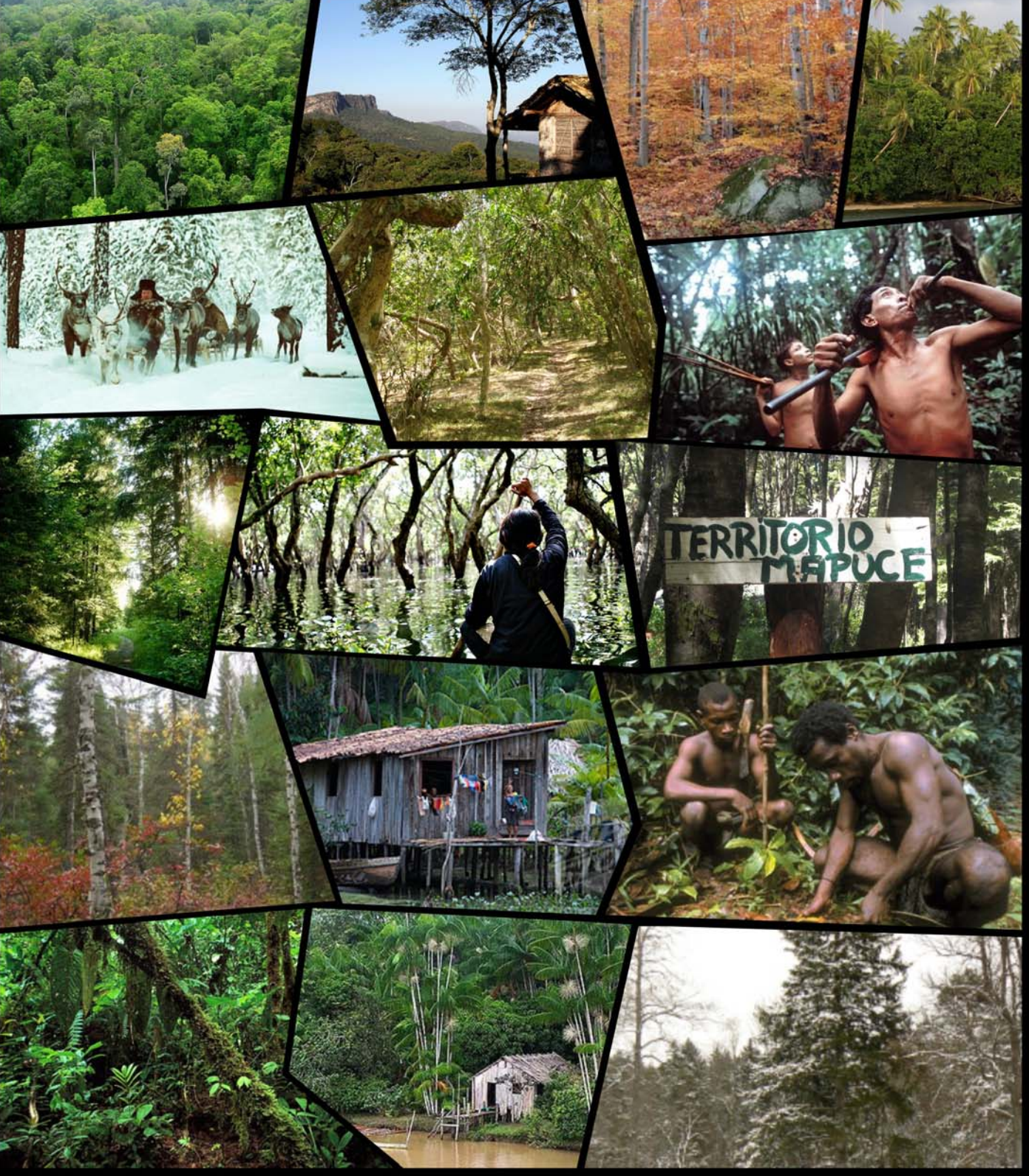

The definition of Forest

World Rainforest Movement

The definition of forest

Introduction

When we talk about "the definition of forest", what is perhaps most striking is the fact that, although there are many definitions of the word "forest" in different parts of the world, there is one definition viewed as more official and international, to which many national governments, institutions and other bodies and organizations adhere. This is the definition of forest developed by FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Now, one would imagine that developing a definition of "forest" would not only require the input of experts, like biologists, ecologists and forest engineers, but would also draw on the deep knowledge of people who live in forests or depend on them for their survival.

However, given the way that FAO defines "forest", it would certainly appear that these people played no role in the process, and this leads to a series of problems. It is worth noting that FAO does not live in a forest: its headquarters are in Rome, the capital of Italy.

What is FAO and how does it define "forest"?

FAO was founded in 1945 and, according to its website, it "leads international efforts to defeat hunger." It does this in the following way: "Serving both developed and developing countries, FAO acts as a neutral forum where all nations meet as equals (…)."[1] Does this mean, then, that its definition of "forest" reflects the diversity of views and opinions of its member countries and, above all, of the peoples who live in the forests and other forest experts in those countries?

For a number of years now, FAO has defined "forest" as "Land with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares (ha). The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 meters (m) at maturity *in situ*."[2]

This definition raises a number of concerns.

[1] http://www.fao.org
[2] http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/ad665e/ad665e06.htm

First of all, it leads to the question: why does this definition focus exclusively on trees, and not on the other living beings and organisms, such as plants, insects, mammals, reptiles and birds – and forest peoples, for that matter – which also form an integral part of a forest?

Secondly, this definition – as well as being limited to the presence of trees – also specifies the height and density of the trees and the size of the area they cover in order to be considered a forest. Based on this definition, the forests of the Amazon, of the Congo Basin, in Indonesia, Malaysia and other tropical countries, with their enormous diversity and wealth of living beings and species, are obviously considered forests.

However, FAO's definition also makes it possible for the millions of hectares of monoculture plantations of eucalyptus, pine and other tree species – which are expanding in these and other countries of the Southern hemisphere, driving indigenous and peasant communities off of their lands and causing serious environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts for these communities – to also be considered "forests".

What factors influence the way FAO defines "forest"?

FAO's definition of "forest" is clearly very different from a common sense conception of what a forest is. It is also not a very serious definition in terms of capturing the complexity of forest ecosystems. The most obvious conclusion, then, is that the way FAO defines "forest" must reflect the interests of someone or some interest group.

Does this definition reflect the interests of forest peoples? It is true that almost all of these peoples use wood to build canoes, houses, fences, etc. But, as we will see further on, what makes forests important to them is by no means limited to wood.

This is, however, another group of actors who are *only* interested in wood: the logging companies and companies who use wood as a raw material for the pulp and paper industry, among others. Pulp and paper companies in particular have spurred the destruction of natural forests to feed their need for wood, and are increasingly investing in large-scale monoculture plantations of fast-growing tree species.

For the industrial sector, the importance of a natural forest is limited exclusively to the presence of trees, while everything else lacks any economic worth. The growing restrictions on logging in natural forests has significantly increased the appeal for this sector of plantations of a single species of fast-growing trees.

These monoculture plantations provide greater yields of wood, which in turn makes the production of pulp, paper, charcoal, etc., even more profitable.

The area of study that addresses this type of plantation is called forestry, which developed in Europe over 200 years ago. Its inherent characteristics – its focus on wood production yields, its practice in the form of monoculture plantations and in the countryside – have meant that this sector has always been very closely associated with large pulp and paper companies, universities, and state agricultural institutions.

It is therefore no surprise that forestry is an issue addressed by FAO: "We help developing countries and countries in transition modernize and improve agriculture, **forestry** and fisheries practices and ensure good nutrition for all" (emphasis added).

FAO, in turn, maintains close links with the paper and forest products industry, for example, through different statutory bodies that advise the FAO Forestry Department. One of these is the Advisory Committee on Paper and Wood Products (ACPWP), composed of executives from the private industry sector. According to the FAO website, the Committee "meets yearly with the main objective of providing guidance on activities and programme of work of the FAO Forestry Department on issues relevant to the paper and forest products industry," supposedly "in support of member countries efforts to progress towards sustainable development."[3]

At the Committee's last annual meeting, in May 2011, there were a number of presentations whose titles raise doubts for us regarding FAO's close relationship with this corporate sector: "What can forest industry (wood, pulp, paper) do better to become more successful in its image renewal with the civil society?" and "What are the innovation trajectories, new business models and partnerships that will help turn forest industry into a new green giant?"[4]

Another result of this partnership between FAO and the corporate sector is the creation of joint publications, such as the study released in 2008 under the title "Impact of the global forest industry on atmospheric greenhouse gases", conducted by FAO and the International Council of Forest and Paper Associations (ICFPA). The goal of the study was to "raise the industry's profile in international negotiations on global warming."[5]

[3] http://www.fao.org/forestry/industries/9530/en/
[4] http://www.fao.org/forestry/industries/9530/en/
[5] WRM Bulletin, nr. 157. (www.wrm.org.uy) How FAO helps greenwash the timber industry's greenhouse gas emissions. By Chris Lang. August 2010.

And the people who live in or depend on forests, how do they define them?

According to FAO, the world's forests are home to 300 million people, while the livelihoods of over 1.6 billion people depend on forests.[6] Although FAO encourages the participation of these people in forest management at the local and regional level, we do not see them represented in the organization's main bodies. For those who live in and around forests, is a forest just a collection of trees?

To find out, WRM has produced an audiovisual presentation (www.wrm.org.uy/forests.html) which offers a forum for forest dwellers from different countries – men and women, indigenous and non-indigenous – to talk about the importance of forests in their lives, and what their lives would be like without forests.

Their answers are very different from what the FAO definition tries to "teach" the world about what a forest means. What stands out most is the degree of personal attachment and care expressed by these people when they talk about forests. There is probably a very clear and simple reason for this, which they also express: the forest is like a "home" for these people, and it provides them with everything they need for their well-being, such as food, medicine, water and protection. There is no way that a eucalyptus or pine plantation could possibly fulfil the broad, rich definitions of forest offered by these people.

And when asked what their lives would be like without forests, it becomes abundantly clear that the forests are what give meaning to their lives, by ensuring not only their physical survival, but their cultural and spiritual survival as well.

What is at stake?

There is no longer any doubt about the importance of forests for the preservation of life on the planet. As a result, saying that a monoculture tree plantation of more than 100,000 hectares is a "forest" represents a major victory and enormous empowerment for the pulp and paper, charcoal and other forest product industries that promote monoculture tree plantations in Brazil, Chile, South Africa, Mozambique, Thailand, Indonesia and so many other countries.

By legitimizing these monoculture plantations as "forests", it is much easier for this corporate sector to convince the authorities and the public that its plantations will contribute to environmental recovery and create jobs, wealth and

[6] http://foris.fao.org/static/data/fra2010/FRA2010_Report_1oct2010.pdf

development. This greenwashing also opens the doors of investors and governments to constant expansion projects and the financing of these projects with public resources – doors that might otherwise have been difficult to open.

The forest departments of national governments and international processes also rely on the definition of "forest" proposed by FAO. For example, FAO's definition is used as a reference in meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COPs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This means that, in addition to natural forests, tree plantations can also be used to take advantage of the trend towards viewing forests as important carbon reservoirs and sinks. This opens the doors to more subsidies and more profits for the sector. It was in fact FAO that recommended that "planted forests" be included in the REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism.[7]

This definition also provides large-scale monoculture tree plantations with a positive image at conferences like those of the Convention on Biological Diversity, when everyone, including FAO, knows that biodiversity in plantation areas is practically non-existent.

The situation has been further aggravated by the industry's drive to introduce commercial plantations of genetically modified trees, opening up the possibility that we could soon be faced with large-scale GM "forests" and the consequent risk of irreparable and still unknown damage to the genetic composition of the many native tree species in the world's forests.

And what about the plantations for biomass production now being promoted primarily to meet the demand for the European Union target of a 10% share of "renewable" energy in the transport sector?

The way forward

If FAO is an organization that represents the world's countries, and these countries, in turn, have governments that represent – at least in theory – their respective populations, one would assume that these populations should be heard before FAO makes decisions that will have major consequences for them. There could perhaps be consultations organized with the peoples who live in and depend on forests for their survival, in order to jointly seek means of effective participation in important FAO decisions related to forests. This could be a way for FAO to fulfil its commitment to "neutrality".

[7] http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/al248e/al248e00.pdf

It is obvious that this is not currently the way things are done, despite the fact that, in its new strategy for forests and forestry for the coming years, FAO spares no effort in demonstrating its good intentions, stating that "Forestry is about people."[8] Unfortunately, however, for now one can only conclude that as far as FAO is concerned, "Forestry is about private industry." And this will not change as long as FAO's partnerships are limited to the pulp and paper product industry sector, and there is no effective participation in its decision-making processes by forest peoples and others who depend on forests.

This is why organizations of forest peoples and/or peoples who depend on forests, along with other organizations, activists and experts committed to forest conservation, must continue to challenge FAO regarding the way this publicly funded agency currently defines "forest". This definition leads to constant negative impacts on the lives of a great many communities around the world and weakens their struggles to live with dignity.

And this in turn is why we are calling on FAO to urgently initiate a process for the review of its definition of "forest", which includes listening to and guaranteeing privileged participation by forest peoples and others who depend on forests in the design and coordination of the process. This would be a fundamental step and an important definition in the difficult struggle for forest conservation.

[8] http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/al043e/al043e00.pdf