
Biochar: "Sustainable charcoal" from 556 million hectares of plantations?

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Two previous WRM Bulletins (January and September 2009) reported on the "biochar" concept – the idea of producing charcoal on a large scale and applying it to soils on the assumption that this will store carbon for thousands of years and slow down if not reverse climate change as well as making soils more fertile, producing 'renewable energy' and doing all sorts of other magical things.[1]

Firstly, biochar advocates have become far bolder: In the past, most of them liked to speak about making biochar from nothing but 'residues', although even then it was clear that their figures did not add up and that new tree plantations were likely. Last month, however, several leading biochar advocates, amongst them the chair and vice-chair of the International Biochar Initiative (IBI), published an article in science magazine 'Nature Communications' where they suggested that a large amount of biochar could be made from 'crops and trees' grown on 'abandoned cropland' as well as on converted tropical grasslands. They conveniently omitted to say how much land would be required. More than twenty organisations issued a press release to point out that nearly 370 million hectares of land would need to be converted to biochar plantations to meet the 'sustainable biochar potential' claimed by the authors – showing the 'true colours' of biochar advocates. The groups pointed out that the concept of 'abandoned croplands' is already being widely used to justify land-grabbing, including for agrofuels, across the global South and that croplands classed as such are often anything but 'abandoned' but instead are home to millions of people as well as being essential for biodiversity. [2] Surprisingly, one of the authors later informed us that they had an even higher land figure in mind: They were thinking of 556 million hectares worldwide!

Secondly, biochar advocates have now got a 'credible strategy' for achieving their main aim: Attracting carbon offsets so as to kickstart their programme. They continue trying to get biochar included into various carbon trading schemes, including the UN Clean Development Mechanism, but their immediate aims are two different schemes: On the one hand, they hope to attract large-scale voluntary carbon offsets. So far, a lot more carbon finance for industrial tree plantations has come from voluntary carbon offsetting than from the Clean Development Mechanism. On the other hand, they have found a big new ally: The Canadian tar sands industry. Or, to be more specific, ConocoPhillips Canada, one of the main tar sands investors. Together, they are now trying for tar-sands carbon offsets with charcoal – through the Alberta' "tar sands" Offsetting System.[3]

During September, the IBI, together with the state-owned agricultural research institute in Brazil, Embrapa, held their Third International Conference. The main outcome from the conference was an even closer link with 'tar sands offsetting'. The BI hired one of the chief architects of the Alberta offsetting scheme, Keith Driver, as the lead person to devise 'biochar standards'. Interestingly, for all their talk about 'sustainable biochar', they seem to have dropped the idea of 'sustainability standards' for now – they are now only interested in technical 'industry standards' to commercially scale up biochar production as quickly as possible. This approach at least seems more honest than any 'biochar sustainability standards', which would be farcical in the context of the vast land-conversion to plantations being promoted for biochar and the IBI's open links with members of the tar sands

industry, one of the most destructive, polluting and climate-destroying industries on the planet.

At the same IBI conference, some of the same people trying to work out the new 'tar sands-charcoal' offsetting deal got to visit what they claim to be their 'inspiration' – ancient soils in Central Amazonia created by indigenous farmers 500-2,500 years ago by mixing charcoal with diverse organic residues. The irony could hardly be greater.

Notes:

- 1) For more background information about debate about how or whether 'biochar' works, see www.econexus.info/pdf/Agriculture_climate_change_copenhagen_2009.pdf, Chapter 5
- 2) www.globaljusticeecology.org/pressroom.php?ID=439
- 3) This collaboration centres on the 'Biochar Protocol' development: <http://www.biocharprotocol.com/>. Although the IBI is not listed as a partner, they are involved as formal partners of the Carbon War Room.

Source: [WRM's bulletin N° 159 October 2010](#)