
[The Racist Colonial Roots of Western Forest Conservation: A look into a REDD project in Kenya](#)

It would be both ahistorical and apolitical to not firmly locate the roots of the western concepts of nature conservation to the colonial era. Political ecologist and eco-feminist Dr. Vandana Shiva makes this relationship very clear in her book, 'Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India', when she states that,

“When the British colonized India, they first colonized her forests. Ignorant of their wealth and the wealth of knowledge of local people to sustainably manage the forests, they displaced local rights, local needs and knowledge and reduced this primary source of life to timber.” (Shiva 1990)

When the women of the Chipko movement from the Himalaya region rose up to protest and protect their forests from commercial exploitation in the 1970's by putting their bodies and lives at risk, it was a continuation of almost a century of resistance across the country. The British colonial administration introduced the Forest Acts of 1878 and 1972 which completely eroded local people's rights to their forests while giving unfettered access to the British military and its corporations.

These women were not just rejecting a political and economic order imposed on them and which served the interests of the British Empire, including a local elite; but they were in effect challenging the various manifestations of hetero-patriarchal capitalism that now presented itself in the re-defining and re-valuing of “nature” based on a western patriarchal world-view. A worldview that puts profits over the welfare of people and ecosystems as well as over their productive and reproductive work. One which completely fails to see the interconnectedness of “nature” and that is steeped deep in the racist politics of othering the “native” and specifically their ways of knowing.

One of the places where these tensions and ideological differences play out strongly is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the global body tasked with working with world governments to chart a path that would address the climate crises. Unfortunately, the consensus among progressive groups and frontline communities battling the impacts of the crises is that the negotiations have been open to corporate lobbying and have allowed Western countries, those most responsible for the crises, to undermine principles of equity and justice and have in effect bullied Southern nations into carrying the largest share of the burden of adaptation and mitigation efforts via carbon markets.

The importance of forests and forest eco-systems to this planet extends far beyond literally acting as the lungs of the earth by absorbing carbon dioxide emissions and releasing oxygen. Millions of people worldwide, including indigenous peoples, depend on forest resources for all or part of their sustenance and livelihoods. Forests refill aquifers when water gets past their roots; they protect downstream ecosystems by soaking up surface run-off and they bear significant spiritual, cultural and linguistic value in every part of the world but more so in the worldviews of indigenous peoples.

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) is an example of a carbon

market mechanism under the UNFCCC. It places a monetary value on the carbon being “absorbed” by forests under the belief that providing money for local communities, states, NGOs and corporations will give the “incentives” to protect forests – and the carbon they hold. This, then, reframes the climate crises not as a historical problem rooted in the fossil-fuel based capitalist development model but rather as a market problem to be solved by the same economic system(s) that created the problem.

REDD in Kenya: reinforcing historical inequalities

The “Kasigau corridor REDD project”, located in Taita Taveta County in Kenya, provides an interesting case into the ways in which carbon markets depoliticize and de-historicize not only local community experiences of the ways in which their ecosystems and livelihoods are destroyed but also the global climate change discussions. The project, now in its 3rd phase of implementation, began in 2008 on ranches under various forms of ownership and land tenure systems: individual, private companies and Directed Agricultural Companies (DACs).

The project is run by Wildlife Works, a US based Private Corporation, which estimates that the Kasigau project will help avoid over 48 million metric tonnes of carbon emissions over a 30-year period. The emission reductions are mainly through land-use change monitoring and management practices, which include putting a halt to slash and burn farming, charcoal production as well as reducing deforestation and forest degradation. It is estimated that 400 people are employed by the project in running its operations, including an export-processing factory for clothing.

The carbon credits generated by the project are sold on the voluntary market and the revenue is divided in 3 ways (at least in theory); a third going to the project implementer, Wildlife Works, another third going to the local communities in the settlement areas while the remaining third goes to the ranch owners. A research paper released last year highlights the problematic manner in which the profits are being shared at present. In reality, the land owners (ranch owners) are paid first, then the project costs are deducted with the remainder of the money being distributed to local communities (1).

The research also reveals that the ranch owners had signed 30-year contractual agreements that entitled them to a third of the revenue generated before costs associated with the project implementation are deducted. Local communities on the other hand did not have any legally binding agreements with the project that clearly defined their revenue share. They only had something that could be described as a “gentleman’s agreement” and often received only a sixth of the revenue collected. This despite the fact that communities are allowed neither doing sustenance agriculture nor using forests as they used to do.

But revenue allocation is not the only problem associated with the project, there are serious issues around how the carbon project is further reinforcing historical inequalities around land that the local communities (most notably the Taita) have faced since Kenya was under British colonial rule. The land under which the project is under was initially communal land, before colonial land policies in the 20th century drastically changed the land tenure system to various forms of private ownership that successive post-independence governments in Kenya have further entrenched.

In the 1920’s and 30’s the colonial administration facilitated the setting up of large-scale commercial farming estates that primarily planted sisal and coffee by leasing land to white farmers. Thousands of local communities were swiftly evicted from their land during this period and were also restricted from accessing communal lands they used seasonally for hunting, gathering and grazing. These lands

were labeled as “idle” by the administration, a term that is still used to describe lands used by local and indigenous communities globally. In addition to this, more land was annexed from local communities for the creation of national parks and reserves and therefore further increasing their land grievances and also undermining the knowledge and relationship that the communities had with nature and wildlife.

Post-independence, ranches were created on trust lands (land held on behalf of the local communities by local government councils) but rather than reverse the historical injustices that the communities had long faced, a local elite consisting mostly of politicians granted themselves and their allies land leases on an individual or shareholder basis in Directed Agricultural Companies (DACs). Eventually, most of the ranches went into debt due to mismanagement and the general failure of the local coffee and sisal markets; but ranch ownership dynamic still remains, even as a lot of the local community members have been forced into becoming squatters on these ranches and other lands owned by private individuals.

What happens when communities already marginalized by land tenure systems that privilege individual private property ownership are subjected to projects that ensure that land-based wealth and power remains in the hands of a few? And, what happens when these projects restrict the livelihood and sustenance work communities do by “locking in” forests for carbon projects? The Kasigau project not only deepens the issue of land injustice but also explicitly favors ranch owners in matters of revenue allocation. Yet, the costs of land insecurity and rigid demands of the carbon project on land use are borne by the local communities.

“Carbon issues” cannot be separated from the broader concerns around forest rights and human rights. This is why frontline communities and activists around the world demand that discourses on climate change as well as the solutions need to be attentive to the politics and histories of the world and particularly the geo-political narratives that have marked the association of the Global North and Global South.

As it stands, market mechanisms like REDD+ redefine “nature” by taking on a particularly ideological route – one which would further reinforce the “supremacy” of a concept of western conservation that only sees forests as trees and then literally as money. Meanwhile, local communities are viewed as hindrances to “nature conservation” and thus, profit making. Ultimately, REDD+ does not address the root causes of forest destruction. Projects like the Kasigau project not only deepen local inequalities and racist practices but they also allow polluting industries that are buying the generated carbon credits to do the same elsewhere.

The scale and speed of the ecological crises of food, energy and climate are not only unprecedented but their impacts are largely concentrated in the Global South and in spaces and territories in the Global North in which people of color, including tribal and first nations people reside. All over the world it has been extremely apparent that the impacts of the ecological crises bear distinct racial and class markers. Locking in people’s land and territories using REDD+ projects reinforce the anti-commons, class war on the poor, anti-indigenous, anti-women, racist and discriminatory ideologies around access to land and we must reject the idea that our forests are for sale!

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(1) <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837715002926>

