
"Sustainable Forest Landscapes": A new frontier for the commodification of nature

In this first issue of 2014, we once again address the subject of “environmental services”. In a previous WRM bulletin on the same subject – Issue 175 of 2012 – we stressed that it is impossible to put a price on the essential functions through which nature makes life on earth possible. We also stressed the need to defend – rather than sell – the land, the forests and their functions, as well as to defend the rights of the people who depend on them. But we also observed that for markets, the trade in environmental services, dominated by financial capital, represents promising new business opportunities, a new source of profits. (1)

We believe it is important to devote another issue of the bulletin to the subject of “environmental services” because the “market” for these services is growing, although many are not aware of it. We want to alert people to the growing worldwide trend in which the mechanism of “payment for environmental services” is increasingly turning into “trade in environmental services”. In other words, large-scale “development” projects continue to be undertaken with emphasis now placed on how the destruction they cause is being “offset”. The idea being promoted is that the “environmental services” destroyed by these projects are not really lost, because they are being preserved in “similar” areas somewhere else. The thematic article in this bulletin argues that this has proven to be a serious threat to communities seeking to defend their territories, whether in the areas destroyed or the areas chosen for conservation to supposedly offset the destruction.

Why is trade in “environmental services” now expanding so much? The last round of the annual international climate change conference (COP 19), held in November 2013 in Poland, offers some clues. On the one hand, little progress was made – what else is new? – in terms of defending the climate. No decisions were adopted to drastically reduce the emissions of the most industrialized countries, leading a sizable group of NGOs to symbolically pull out from the event. On the other hand, various assessments demonstrate that one area in which progress seems to have been made at the conference was in negotiations for an agreement on REDD+, one of the “environmental services” mechanisms most heavily supported by the governments of polluting countries of the North. REDD+ is based on the capacity of forests to absorb CO₂, and the idea that they can absorb part of the atmospheric pollution produced by these countries. But there is growing evidence of the many problems related with REDD+ projects, particularly for the communities who live in the areas where these projects are implemented. Moreover, the REDD+ mechanism has as yet failed to have any positive impact on the climate, especially when it used to falsely “offset” the pollution generated in industrialized countries of the North.

This is the proposition, for example, in one of the world’s most advanced sub-national REDD+ programmes: the agreement between the polluting state of California (USA) and two states with tropical forests, Acre (Brazil) and Chiapas (Mexico). Has the time finally come to genuinely confront the problem of climate change?

Apparently not, because the current trend is to continue pushing forward false solutions. A little

publicized initiative was launched during the climate summit in Poland. Known as the Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes, it will be managed by the World Bank's BioCarbon Fund and initially financed by three big polluting countries of the North: the United States, the United Kingdom and Norway. Multinational corporations linked to industrial agriculture, such as Unilever and Bunge, have been involved in the initiative since its inception; it is therefore a public-private partnership. The aim is to scale up "sustainable management" practices and technologies not only in forested areas but in agricultural areas as well, through the implementation of so-called "climate-smart agriculture". In other words, they no longer refer to forests but rather to entire landscapes or "forest landscapes", justified by the argument that a more "holistic" approach is needed, in order to preserve not only the forests but the landscape as a whole. In its rationale for creating this initiative, the World Bank points to the fact that during the last decade – while a great deal of time and effort was devoted to preventing deforestation through REDD+ – an area the size of Western Europe was lost to deforestation. (2)

However, as we know, the World Bank plays a major role in promoting polluting and destructive activities, some of which drive tropical deforestation, while at the same time, it supports and promotes the idea of "offsetting" these activities through trade in "environmental services", including REDD+ projects and biodiversity credits. As the number of destructive projects continues to grow at an alarming rate, the possibility of access to "landscapes" – i.e. entire regions – encompassing forests, other ecosystems, communities, agricultural areas, etc., is highly attractive, because it opens up more opportunities to supposedly offset polluting activities. Within these "landscapes" lie all of the "environmental services" that have been defined so far and can be commodified and traded on the financial markets: in addition to the function of carbon absorption by plants, the "landscape" offers other "environmental services", such as water resources, soils, biodiversity of flora and fauna, the scenic beauty of landscapes, and even the knowledge of traditional peoples.

What's more, forest or agricultural "landscapes" offer opportunities for new "sustainable" business operations from a corporate perspective, such as, for example, those related to agribusiness. There has been talk, for example, of planting genetically modified rice which would supposedly require fewer fertilizers and thus be beneficial for the climate. This proposal was recently condemned by numerous organizations during the latest round of WTO talks in Bali, Indonesia, yet it is still included under the category of "climate-smart agriculture". (3)

Quite honestly, very little can be expected from initiatives undertaken by institutions like the World Bank – a symbol of global capitalist hegemony, in partnership with transnational corporations – in terms of the adoption of measures to structurally attack deforestation or climate change and to combat their direct and, especially, indirect causes, such as the current system of predatory production and growing consumption, dominated by the transnational corporations themselves. What the World Bank is doing is attempting to fool us, as always, by complicating the debate and confusing us with talk of a "holistic" approach and "climate-smart agriculture". It is up to all of us to seek full understanding of every new proposal, such as the growing trade in "environmental services", and then to join forces and organize to fight back against them.

Happy reading!

Sources:

(1) WRM Bulletin Issue 175 – Environmental Services.

(2) BioCarbon Fund launches \$280 million initiative for sustainable forest landscapes, [http://www.worldbank.org/en/news](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/11/20/biocarbon-fund-initiative-promote-sustainable-forest-landscapes)

[/feature/2013/11/20/biocarbon-fund-initiative-promote-sustainable-forest-landscapes](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/11/20/biocarbon-fund-initiative-promote-sustainable-forest-landscapes)

(3) No REDD Rice Manifesto,

<http://no-redd.com/no-redd-rice-manifesto-no-wto-no-redd-no-to-using-rice-for-carbon-markets-2/>