
[“Non-human Nature”: an invention that seeks to break societies rooted in forests](#)

Have you ever wondered what the word “nature” means? The colonial roots of this concept and its current dominant use refer to “nature” defined as non-human nature: A collection of “untouched” species, or a “wild space” separated from human populations. Even though they were promoted early last century, these ideas continue to govern many debates and projects currently developed in the name of “conservation,” with “experts” and NGOs specialized in the “control” and “management” of “nature.” Therefore, peoples who have co-existed for generations with these “spaces” are seen as a threat and obstacle to “conserve” this coveted non-human nature. The supposed superiority of such “experts” on the knowledge, practices and lives of forest peoples reinforces the erroneous and racist idea that nature and human beings are separate. This refers to the fact that the “experts” – mostly white and “civilized” – can enter, study and modify non-human nature, while denying the role that forest peoples have played for thousands of years in forming part of this “nature.” Thus, the dominant idea that there is a separation between nature and society becomes elemental in the push to fragment and dominate knowledge and forest-based societies.

Most conservation agencies emphasize the alleged threats caused by the expansion of human populations into “nature”: An external nature which can be dominated, controlled, managed, categorized, and fully (ab)used as a “natural resource.” The supremacy of this definition in the political imagination is also a strategy of domination and power. As the thinker Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains: “Once nature is transformed into a resource, there is no other logic than to exploit it until its exhaustion. Separated from man and society, it is not possible to think about mutual interactions” (1). Thus, in the current Green Economy push, even “conservation” activities become another resource. Increasingly, “protected areas” are established taking into account the economic benefits of offset markets. REDD-type and biodiversity offset projects, for example, generate credits that can be sold in financial markets that allow for an “equivalent” deforestation/pollution to what is “conserved” in the offset project.

In this context, it is not surprising that the vast majority of “conservation” projects that work with communities are aimed at trying to “teach” or “train” forest peoples on the use of other subsistence practices that allow for their environments to remain “intact.” In other words, their use of forests is enormously restricted, as is their possibility to exist as a people in close interaction with their environment. In this way, this constitutes an attempt to destroy peoples who not only live in close relationship with, but as an intrinsic part of “nature.”

Yet, isn't deforestation caused by large-scale destruction from extractive activities, infrastructure, industrial plantations, logging, etc? That's right. And that's why the focus of this reflection is on how most “conservation” projects, integrated into a structurally racist system, aim to “change” forest peoples and not the direct causes of deforestation. The “civilizing” mission of colonization continues, and is very present in the practices and ways of thinking of many NGOs and government programs; which in turn covers up the destructive role of large-scale industrial projects in deforestation.

For example, traditional crop rotation practices widely used by forest communities – which involves using a small area of forest to grow food for a few seasons and then leaving the area to regenerate, while another area is prepared for cultivation - is identified as the major cause of deforestation. Multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the FAO have been crucial in stigmatizing this practice as “retrograde” or “backward.” In 1957, after an FAO report declared crop rotation to be a “backward stage of culture in general” (2), this idea was consolidated among the “experts” in the matter as a devastating practice for biodiversity and forests.

It is important to emphasize that the permanent conversion of forests into pasture or large-scale monoculture is clearly harmful, whether it is done by transnational or local companies. But that is radically different from the traditional practice of crop rotation. Despite the many differences among peoples, traditions and forests, the common denominator is that crop rotation maintains soil fertility, avoids the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and allows for forest regeneration by letting cultivated areas rest through a constant rotation cycle. In cases where crop rotation is creating forest degradation, the initial cause of this is usually shortened rotation cycles, due to there being less land available and hence making rotation unviable. Forest degradation is almost always the result of the expansion of industrial mega plantations or mega infrastructure projects or industrial logging, which grab land which communities depend upon for food production (3).

REDD: Forests with people without rights?

As should be expected, after being stigmatized as one of the main forest problems, crop rotation is now also being presented as a climate change problem. REDD programs and projects tirelessly claim to have the supposed “solution” to the population “problem” of “nature,” by claiming that REDD will provide economic benefits to communities as long as they keep their forests intact. That is, they transform areas into forests-without-people, or forests-with-people-without-rights-to-use-them, which creates more conflict between and within communities and threatens their livelihoods and traditional knowledge. Official REDD documents usually include proposals to increase yields on existing plots through “modernization” of traditional practices, such as crop rotation. In reality, however, the vast majority of these proposals fail because they are not appropriate to particular local circumstances. Moreover, the idea of wanting to “educate” forest peoples to “improve” their traditional practices—through a project that will generate credits which in turn will allow for continued pollution/deforestation elsewhere—is fundamentally racist and patronizing.

REDD is a good business for international conservation groups like The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International and WWF, because they can obtain a large part of the international donations and climate financing that is available for REDD. Involved in many REDD projects and initiatives, they often operate as intermediaries to reach communities and act as advisors on REDD plans at the national, regional and municipal levels. None of these groups have revealed the size of their REDD budgets, or how much of their funding comes from climate financing that industrialized countries count as REDD payments to the Global South (4).

“There is no compensation, only fines to pay”: the Holistic Conservation Programme for Forests in Madagascar, by WWF and Air France (5)

The “Holistic Conservation Programme for Forests” in Madagascar is run by the WWF. It covers 380,000 hectares of rainforest and 125,000 hectares of dry thorn forest. The first stage of the project, from October 2008 to December 2012, was funded by a 5-million Euro contribution from Air France. GoodPlanet acted as a liaison between Air France and WWF Madagascar, and was responsible for the methodological and scientific aspects of the project. With the start of the second phase of the

project in 2012, the GoodPlanet Foundation transferred management of activities to the association Etc Terra. Funding for this second stage came from the French Development Agency and the French fund for Global Environment, and Air France could also provide an additional million Euros. Carbon credit generation is one of the objectives of the second stage.

A report by Basta! and Friends of the Earth France quotes Pierre de Caussade, ex Director of Environment and Sustainable Development for Air France, when he said: “This project was developed in part to help local communities better manage their livelihoods and improve their life conditions. But there was also a scientific aspect, consistent with our concerns about climate change. We estimate that the program will allow us to reduce 35 billion tons of CO2 emissions caused by deforestation.”

In 2010, Air France issued a statement categorically clarifying that the project was in no way a carbon offset program. Two and a half years later, Air France recognized that the project would generate carbon credits and claimed that all the money would go to local communities. A report and video by Friends of the Earth France shows that this is also not true. Project implementation limits the population's access to forest areas and risks displacing local peoples, thus threatening their means of livelihood. Forests and land are no longer spaces that can support livelihoods and sustenance, but rather have become carbon reserves that Air France must protect in order to offer its customers carbon neutral flights. A forest police force was created to monitor these prohibited lands, and is in charge of tracking villagers who clear forest areas to grow food for their own consumption. Anyone caught in the act risks facing a hefty fine. If the person cannot pay, he/she risks being sent to jail. Patrols also have planes that fly over the villages. These surveillance activities make clear that one of the main objectives of the project is to prevent communities from practicing *hatsake*, or shifting cultivation: “If I don't pay [the fine], I run the risk of ending up in prison. We are scared, that's why we don't even touch the forest there. Not even to feed our children. It is really hard: Where are we going to get 800,000 ariary [national currency] if they find us clearing land?” one villager asked Basta! and Friends of the Earth researchers.

“Conservation” activities much more closely resemble land grabbing, dispossession of collective rights, and economic benefits for big industry—which can continue and expand their businesses smoothly—than anything else. Financiers of conservation NGOs and REDD-type offset projects alert us to who the true beneficiaries are: extractive industries, industrial plantation companies and the World Bank, among others. Meanwhile, the stigmatization of traditional crop rotation as the main cause of deforestation, and the denial of forest people's rights is a frontal attack against these populations and their cultures. As long as forest peoples' coexistence with “nature” is attacked and even prohibited, despite them having managed to keep forests standing, rivers clean and soils fertile, “conservation” projects and programs facilitate the continuation of an economic system that is at the root of environmental and social destruction.

Joanna Cabello, joanna@wrm.org.uy
Member of the WRM International Secretariat

(1) Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2008, “Conocer desde el Sur: para una cultura política emancipadora”,

(2) http://www.boaventuradesousasantos.pt/media/Conocer%20desde%20el%20Sur_Lima_2006.pdf

(3) <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5382e/x5382e03.htm#shifting%20cultivation>

(4)

<http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/how-redd-projects-undermine-peasant-farming-and-real-solutions-to-climate-change/>

(5) Summarized case from the WRM publication, "REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies",

<http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/> See also Basta! & Friends of the Earth (2013): "REDD+ in Madagascar: You Can't See the Wood for the Carbon". http://www.amisdelaterre.org/IMG/pdf/rap_madagascar_en.pdf