
[‘High Conservation Value Forests’ in an international context](#)

Ever since its foundation 20 years ago, the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) has stood for bottom-up efforts to protect the world’s forests against destructive development and top-down planning. We challenge imposed ‘solutions’ to the world’s forest crisis which exclude local communities, indigenous peoples, women and the oppressed by denying them a voice and rights to forge their own destinies. We continue to insist that even well-intentioned efforts to ‘save the rainforests’ will fail if they are not rights-based and genuinely participatory. The NGOs that set up the WRM at two conferences in Malaysia in 1986 and 1987 adopted the credo ‘We are not the solution. The solutions lie with the people.’

Things have not changed much since then. We still live in a world where unfair laws mean that community rights to lands and forests are often un-recognised and ill-secured, where governments tend to favour the interests of large companies and capital-intensive enterprises, where access to justice is tortuous and an independent judiciary a distant dream, and where politicians tend to pander to the rich and overlook the voices of the poor and powerless. The continuing inequalities between North and South and the growing disparities in wealth within both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries pose further obstacles to landless and forest-dependent peoples securing just and equitable access to natural resources. In such a world, political reforms and improved ‘governance’ to give people a greater stake in decision-making should be a priority. The WRM stands with those civil society groups that call for mandatory controls, corporate accountability, rule of law and improved state capacity to regulate the private sector.

Unfortunately, but in line with corporate interests, the main trends in ‘world development’ are working in the opposite direction. We are still in an era of deregulation and structural adjustment, trade liberalisation and accelerated transfers of capital, goods and services. In this context, to wait for much-needed political reforms in both developed and developing countries, may be to wait too long. The rate of destruction of the world’s forests continues to increase, despite reassuring statistics from FAO technocrats showing the opposite, as they fail to distinguish between natural forests and the industrial mono-crops that are being planted to replace them.

This is the context in which efforts to improve the social and environmental performance of corporations through the promotion of Corporate Social Responsibility and market-led reforms have moved centre stage. And not surprisingly these voluntary approaches, which imply the development of voluntary standards and codes of conduct applied through self-regulation, peer review and third party verification, continue to be preferred by industry over strict, enforceable, mandatory state controls. The main civil society organisations that are pushing these voluntary approaches are the large conservation agencies, while human rights groups and social justice organisations, community groups and indigenous peoples have tended to stay clear of them, with the result that social issues are often poorly addressed.

This issue of the WRM Bulletin thus focuses attention on the renewed debate about ‘High Conservation Value Forests’ (HCVF), a conceptual tool being increasingly used by big conservation NGOs and corporations, and now also by State planning agencies, to zone forested landscapes in

order to optimise forest management. How is this tool being applied? Whose interests are 'optimised'? What guarantees are there that communities' rights are respected and their voices heard in decisions about land use?

The HCVF concept was first promoted by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as a way of providing extra protection to critically important forests. Many conservation NGOs hoped that the concept would be used to establish 'no go' areas, off limits to logging and conversion. Meanwhile, in defining the concept more precisely it was realised that 'high conservation values' are as much social as biological and so six types of HCVF were identified - as forests that were critical habitats, critical ecosystems, contained threatened and endangered species, provided critical environmental services, were critical for livelihoods, and critical for the maintenance of cultural values. This is unquestionably a strength of the HCVF approach – that it seeks to include a broad range of values and requires a participatory approach to their identification.

Although the HCVF concept was developed within the context of timber certification, as just one of 10 of the FSC Principles and Criteria, it has since begun to be used much more broadly. The FSC itself is applying the concept to non-certified woods (but 'controlled wood') that it permits can be used in mixed wood products that still carry the FSC label. The concept is also being used by corporations very broadly as a tool to help them decide where they should responsibly source timbers. Others now use it to decide where they should and should not establish plantations. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil has adopted the concept into its newly adopted standard for 'sustainable palm oil' production and efforts are underway to introduce the concept into the standard being adopted by the parallel Roundtable on Responsible Soy. The World Bank is also exploring how the concept can be applied to help it define what are the 'critical forests' and 'critical habitats' that its policies on forests and natural habitats are meant to safeguard. In short, HCV has emerged as a widely applied tool in land use planning, with all the possibilities and risks that this implies.

Experience teaches us that land use planning and zoning tools, however much they are promoted as 'multi-stakeholder' methods, can rarely be fully inclusive, as they imply a degree of 'top-down', planning. Outsiders' efforts to involve local people always face challenges due to limited time and resources, language barriers, unconscious or overt prejudices and preconceptions and the economic and political marginalisation of 'target groups'. And the larger the scale of such zoning - and the more that reliance is placed on hi-tech, like GIS-based mapping - the greater are the risks that local communities' rights, interests, visions and knowledge will get overlooked.

Questions are also raised by the wider implications of the HCV approach if it comes to be applied on its own without being implanted in a broader approach to landscape planning. Is there a risk that when an area is deemed not to contain HCV then it is considered OK to log, mine or convert it? How do we avoid the nightmare scenario of islands of 'high conservation value' being surrounded by devastated 'sacrifice zones'?

Aware of some of these pitfalls, a new network has now been established – the High Conservation Value Resources Network – which aims to debate these challenges and find agreed ways of overcoming them, though still within the voluntary, business-friendly context preferred by corporations.

Protecting 'High Conservation Values' is a worthy goal, but if this is done in ways that do not respect communities rights or promote their priorities it can also be a dangerous threat for people and nature both inside and outside the areas defined as having High Conservation Values. This issue of the WRM Bulletin is offered as a contribution to this debate.

