
International discourse and on-the-ground reality

Since the 1992 Earth Summit, many trees have been felled to provide paper for the voluminous documents produced by a number of intergovernmental processes --including parallel expert meetings-- aimed at addressing the urgent problem of deforestation. Many solutions have since then been found ... on paper.

The real world is clearly going in another direction. Forests are set on fire to give way to "development" plans, including eucalyptus, oil palm, soya and other monocrops; forests are cleared to be substituted by cattle-raising; mangroves are disappearing to provide shrimp to mostly Northern consumers; tropical forests are being destroyed and polluted by oil exploration and mining; and forests are still being exploited for their valuable wood.

All the above problems --and more-- had already been highlighted by the World Rainforest Movement in its 1989 Penang Declaration: "The current social and economic policies and practices that lead to deforestation throughout the world in the name of development are directly responsible for the annihilation of the earth's forests, bringing poverty and misery to millions and threatening global ecosystems with collapse.

Such policies and practices include: plantations, both for industrial forestry and for export crops, ranching schemes, dam projects, commercial logging, colonisation schemes, mining and industry, the dispossession of peasants and indigenous peoples, roads, pollution, tourism."

Nothing much seems to have changed or to be changing in spite of the seemingly concerned declarations of the governments of the world. Even worse, while forests are depleted mostly by greed, many of their hopes are based on the assumption that free trade will be the solution to the problem. While most governments --North and South-- either directly or indirectly continue degrading forests at home and/or abroad, the forest discussion seems to be going no-where.

In such a context, the World Rainforest Movement and Forests Monitor chose the second meeting of the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (Geneva, August 1998) to present the results of their joint research on the activities of Malaysian logging companies abroad. The report ("High Stakes: the need to control transnational logging companies, a Malaysian case study"), stresses that "Malaysian-based logging companies are far from unique in terms of the negative social and ecological impacts that they cause in some of the countries where they operate". (see for example the articles on Gabon, Nicaragua, North America and Australia in this bulletin). However, the activities of Malaysian logging companies constitute a useful example of the impacts resulting from the liberalization process promoted by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

This report --which will be followed by another on forest destruction by Canadian mining companies abroad-- shows that transnational companies and international trade are not only not the solution, but they are in fact an important part of the problem. While the international governmental community continues to support the ideologised concept that an abstract "market" will solve most problems, the

real market continues destroying forests and with them the people that live within. Until such approach changes, the protection of most forests will depend on the ongoing struggles of local peoples, supported by local and international citizens' organizations.

Note: High Stakes is available at WRM's International Secretariat and Northern Office.