
Beyond Forests: Conservation NGOs have Turned into “Companies”

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The World Rainforest Movement (WRM) firmly believes that **it is not possible to separate forests from the communities who depend on them.** This vision is in contrast to that of conservation NGOs, which defend an environment without people, inspired by the national parks model created in the United States (1). That is why the creation and expansion of protected areas without communities has been a constant concern for WRM.

It is a fact that destructive projects—such as logging, mining or agribusiness—cause terrible impacts for forests and communities. However, **conservation parks also expel communities and/or prohibit them from using what they consider to be their home, where they obtain almost everything they need. Conservation parks do this by imposing restrictions on human occupation,** using the perverse argument that it is communities that cause forest destruction.

The real destructive forces advanced on forests at the same time as conservation NGOs. **These organizations were crucial in constructing the neoliberal idea that nature will only be saved if a price is placed on it,** since it is providing “services” for which someone must be paid. This is how “market environmentalism” was born.

Polluting industries liked this: now they have permission to continue polluting while presenting a clean image. They can “offset” part of the emissions they generate from burning oil, gas and coal; by paying to “protect” a forest or install a tree plantation. And instead of reducing their emissions, which are the cause of climate change, they advertise their “good deeds.”

Contrary to what common sense might suggest, conservation **NGOs are some of the biggest beneficiaries of forest destruction:** they managed to gain considerable access to this new source of resources from industries and the governments of the most polluting countries—by being at the forefront of projects that harm communities who are using and protecting forests.

A clear demonstration of this is **the role of NGOs in REDD+ projects** around the world (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). These NGOs include The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Wildlife Works Carbon (WWC). According to these organizations, the REDD+ mechanism not only responds to the climate crisis, but also benefits communities in project areas. Yet, the prevailing vision of REDD+ programs and projects—which are promoted by these organizations—is that communities are obstacles and represent a threat to forests; hence, their

access to and use of forests ends up being prohibited or restricted (2).

Even after ten years of experience in which REDD+ has failed to reduce deforestation, the idea has not died. The mechanism is not only alive, but is now steering programs in much larger areas, far beyond forests. **Landscape-scale REDD+ programs, as they are called, encompass entire jurisdictions, such as an entire province or state within a country.** WWF, for example, administers the main jurisdictional REDD+ program in Africa—in the province of Mai N'dombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo—with World Bank funding (3).

Recent international agreements and mechanisms to influence climate change end up perpetuating this logic. The so-called “**forest landscape restoration approach**” guides the actions of the Bonn Challenge (4), which today is the largest international initiative that aims to “restore” 350 million hectares of forests and landscapes in favor of the climate (5). However, in order to “restore” forests in such a large area, it is only possible to think about large-scale tree plantations, of which there are already tens of millions of hectares in the world.

In this way, the forms of territorial appropriation that these organizations use to expand their influence are multiplying. In Indonesia, they are moving into areas that in the past were already granted to deforesting companies, such as oil palm plantation companies. On the island of Sumatra in Indonesia, the conservation NGOs, WWF and the German Frankfurt Zoological Society,—with funding from the German development bank, KfW,—created the company, ABT, to develop a “restoration” project near the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park. With no access to information about what this company really intends to do, the Kubu community is resisting. **The inhabitants of Kubu, who have a strong relationship with the forest where they live and which they firmly protect, are engaged in a struggle for control of the territory. Concessions covering almost 600,000 hectares have already been granted for “forest landscape restoration” in Indonesia (6).**

Another mechanism is the creation of **projects to “offset” the destruction of biodiversity.** The argument is that the loss of a destroyed forest can be compensated by conserving another, supposedly threatened forest, with “similar characteristics.” For example, mining company Rio Tinto—which caused the destruction of a forest in Madagascar through ilmenite mining (7), decided to pay a local “subsidiary” of the NGO, Birdlife International, to protect another “similar” forest. The NGO restricted the local community's use of the forest, and the community was forced to farm in another, less fertile area that was further away.

The strengthening of national funds for biodiversity conservation, through public-private partnerships called “conservation trust funds,” is headed in the same direction. For example, the Biofund in Mozambique was created, whose members include WWF, the WCS and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (8). One of its functions is to validate destructive projects: companies can “offset” the destruction they cause by investing resources in the maintenance of protected areas or in the creation of new protected areas in the same country. This is what the World Bank suggested be done in Liberia (also in Africa), due to the large mineral reserves in that country—which are extremely attractive to the world's large mining companies (9).

Creating a Conservation “Industry”

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently accepted a complaint presented by the NGO, Survival International, to investigate alleged violations of human rights against the Baka indigenous peoples. The violence was exerted by so-called “eco-guards,” financed by WWF, in a protected area in Cameroon (10). It is important to note that the OECD's

decision was unprecedented, in that it usually only accepts complaints against companies (often multinational). This time, WWF was the offender.

What is very concerning is the spread of the “win-win” commercial logic of “market environmentalism,” and with it, the alliance between destructive forces and conservation NGOs. This logic is based on the principle that **there will be more protection only if there is more destruction.** These organizations also provide other services to destructive companies: Through the use of certifications and “green seals,” they legitimize and declare some activities to be sustainable when they are undeniably destructive.

In this perverse logic that is gradually destroying forests, something *will* be conserved: the interests of “conservation” companies and the amount of resources to which they have access. Will we keep calling these organizations “non-profit”? With this alliance between the industries of conservation and destruction, those who are losing are indigenous, traditional and peasant communities—whose territories and forests are being threatened by these industries' increasingly larger projects.

Many communities have undertaken struggles against these conservation projects. In India, for example, thousands of people are resisting eviction from territories that their communities have had for hundreds and even thousands of years. This is taking place within what are now considered to be tiger reserves. These struggles help strengthen a contrasting vision: that **the best way to conserve forests is to ensure that the communities living in, and taking care of, forests can exercise control over them and their way of life.** These struggles—in different ways—have led to the conquest of their own territories, where the forests are. Nonetheless, the threats continue, and the struggle for social and environmental justice is ongoing. Let us join it—now and always.

- 1- [Salvaging Nature: Indigenous Peoples, Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation](#). WRM.
- 2- [REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies](#), WRM
- 3- [WWF's REDD Project in Mai Ndombe, DRC: No consultation, no transparency and communities paid less than DRC's minimum wage](#), REDD-Monitor, 2017
- 4- [Main initiatives to expand tree plantations in Latin America, Africa and Asia](#), WRM Bulletin 228, 2017
- 5- Bonn Challenge. [Barometer of Progress: Spotlight Report 2017](#), IUCN
- 6- [Ecosystem Restoration Concessions](#), 2016, and a field visit in March 2018 to the community of Kubu
- 7- [Rio Tinto's biodiversity offset project in Madagascar Imposes Severe Restrictions on Local Communities](#), WRM Bulletin 230, 2017
- 8- [BioFund Foundation Bodies](#)
- 9- [World Bank paving the way for a national biodiversity offset strategy in Liberia](#), WRM Bulletin 213, 2015
- 10- [Human rights abuses complaint against WWF to be examined by OECD](#), The Guardian, 2017