
[An \(incomplete\) List of Concepts that Kill Forests](#)

Language is never neutral and certain concepts have historically been used to dominate people and territories. This article highlights concepts related to forests that are usually presented in a positive light but that actually serve economic interests that harm both forests and the communities that inhabit them.

Language and words are contested sites of political struggle. The choices and interpretations that we make when we use language can expose very deep and marked views about how we see, understand and relate to the world. **Language is therefore never neutral and certain concepts have historically been used to dominate people and territories.** The meanings and uses of words are constantly evolving in regard to political conflicts, interests and power.

In this bulletin, WRM reflects on the connection between language, deforestation and concepts that are usually presented as positive and necessary from an environmental and social perspective. In reality, however, they tend to serve the interests of corporate profit accumulation while dominating and harming communities and the forests and territories they depend upon.

This collection of concepts is far from complete. Its aim is to **alert our readers to their meanings and uses, the interests behind them and to outline why each of them represents a contribution to the destruction of forests.**

Sustainable Forest Management

*Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) began to be promoted in tropical forest regions in the late 1980s as a supposed solution to deforestation caused by industrial logging of rainforests. **Selective Logging** was promoted as a key strategy to obtain economic benefits without compromising the dynamic structure and survival of forests. The idea was backed by timber companies, multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank and major conservation NGOs. However, in practice, industrial logging, whether “selective” or not, has proven to be an inherently destructive activity that ultimately kills forests. It is not surprising that SFM’s promise has not been kept. Despite an increase in areas under SFM in rainforests the world over, deforestation has also increased.*

[Logging concessions: Basis of an industry or political control?](#) (WRM Bulletin 217, August 2015)

Community Forestry Management is a subcategory of SFM which makes the concept sound even more optimistic. Conversations with community members who were pressured to join Community Forestry Management schemes, revealed how logging activities made them change their livelihood from one based on non-timber forest products to one based on extracting commercially high-value timber. Because destruction takes place at a much slower pace, communities might only become aware of just how devastating this activity is for the forest after a significant period of time has passed. Although the concept implies that this form of logging is community-led, external forestry engineers lead this corporate model, with the benefits for timber companies and consultancy firms far outweighing those received by communities.

[Voices of local communities in Acre, Brazil, denounce violations of Community-based Sustainable Forest Management](#) (WRM Bulletin 197, December 2013)

[Rethinking Community-based Forest Management in the Congo Basin](#) (Rainforest Foundation UK, November 2014)

Protected Areas

***Protected or conservation areas** do not protect or conserve forests. Rather, they kill the forests as they usually -and often violently- encroach on the ancestral territories of forest peoples. When a forest is left without the people who have been living with and defending it for thousands of years, it tends to be destroyed or deteriorate. Companies have much easier access to exploit such forests as communities are no longer there to oppose them. There are many examples where forest areas that are supposedly protected end up encroached by extractive projects. Moreover, when forests are turned into conservation areas, natural fire regimes and other forest characteristics are at risk. Why is this? Because forest communities and their traditional knowledge have historically supported and enriched the diversity of habitats found in forests. In most cases, people are also prohibited from living in Protected Areas, which means they are unable to maintain their livelihoods and ancestral practices of use and management of those forests.*

[Good Fire or Bad Fire, Who Decides? A Reflection on Fires and Forests](#) (WRM Bulletin 238, June-July 2018)

[Environmental offsets in Panama: A strategy that opens up protected areas to mining](#) (WRM Bulletin 232, July-August 2017)

*Protected Areas were founded on beliefs that originated in the United States in the late 1800s of the need to preserve “intact” areas of “wilderness” without any human presence, mainly for elite hunting and the enjoyment of scenic beauty. This colonial idea of **conservation**, which separates “nature” from “humans”, has also facilitated the division of forests into concession areas for different purposes. While some areas are to be “preserved” without people, others are destroyed by corporate profit-driven interests. Conservationist NGOs are in one way or another involved in most Protected Areas, often in an alliance with companies that are driving deforestation elsewhere.*

[Conservation NGOs: Whose Interests are They Really Protecting?](#) (WRM Bulletin 242, January-February 2019)

Landscape Restoration

*These two words are used together to express a very specific political interest. **Restoration** usually involves planting the trees that create industrial monoculture plantations. Millions of hectares have been pledged for Restoration projects during conferences at the international and regional levels, viewed as a supposed solution to the climate crisis and to halt forest loss. These promises persist despite the well-documented negative impacts of monoculture plantations on the ground. To make matters worse, the same spaces that restoration proponents refer to as a **landscape** are the areas that forest peoples refer to as their **territory**. The latter term makes it clear that the land in question is much more than a geographical landscape. Territory is identity; it is a space for life shaped by complex interactions between human and non-human communities over time. Using the term landscape, in contrast, makes it much easier to create the illusion of empty, underused or degraded lands that can be made available for restoration. Academic studies and global and regional initiatives*

have used this term to claim that millions of hectares of land are available for restoration. In reality, such land is already being used and restoration is likely to take away control over the use of this land, which its occupants call their territory.

[Main Initiatives to expand tree plantations in Latin America, Africa and Asia](#) (WRM Bulletin 228, January 2018)

Logging, oil palm, mining, fossil fuel and agro-businesses are rebranding part of their engagement as Restoration. With this “greener” image, they are not only allowed to continue their operations, but also are now seen as part of “the solution” to deforestation and forest degradation. Thus, restoration also kills forests because it views industrial plantations as positive and sanitizes the corporate image of the companies that are driving deforestation.

[“The claim that global tree restoration is our most effective climate change solution is simply incorrect scientifically and dangerously misleading”](#) (REDD-Monitor, October 2019)

Certification

The message that certification schemes promote is “Just keep buying!” Whenever an industrial or agriculture commodity falls into disrepute, a voluntary certification initiative soon emerges to ensure that their activities are “sustainable” according to their own indicators. Certification schemes kill forests because they legitimize the expansion of those activities driving deforestation.

[Greenwashing continues: FSC certifies industrial tree plantations as forests and RSPO oil palm plantations as sustainable](#) (WRM Bulletin 233, September 2017)

Companies carefully choose which markets they supply with certified products. They target those where consumers want to buy in accordance with their “ethical concerns” and therefore, believe certification labels to be an “insurance” that those products have been produced or extracted using “sustainable” practices. Because labels encourage consumers to keep buying, they are a driver of consumption instead of reducing it. These labels thus aid the expansion of corporate control over even more community land. They have also failed to resolve conflicts between communities and the corporations that have taken over their territories. It is important to note that no certification scheme excludes expansion, mainly so that they can always certify more areas. As such, they are a crucial part of the trade in industrial export commodities.

[Certification promotes land concentration, violence and destruction](#) (WRM Bulletin 240, October 2018)

[Industrial oil palm plantations’ impacts in Indonesia and the experience with the RSPO](#) (WRM Bulletin 201, April 2014)

REDD: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation

*REDD has been the dominant international forest policy mechanism since 2005, and has also been a concept constantly re-defined since its introduction: from REDD to REDD+ (including **Sustainable Forest Management, Reforestation and Conservation Areas**), to landscape and jurisdictional REDD+. Some people don’t even bother to use the term REDD+ anymore and refer instead to “performance-based”, “results-based” or “ecosystem restoration” payment schemes.*

[REDD+: A Scheme Rotten at the Core](#) (WRM Bulletin 245, September 2019)

*As its name suggests, this term refers to the reduction of emissions caused by deforestation. However, 14 years after it first appeared, proponents still can't provide any convincing evidence that REDD+ has actually reduced deforestation. In reality, REDD+ represents a concept that actually destroys forests and causes harm to forest peoples. This is because, as a carbon offset mechanism, it "greenwashes" the image of corporations responsible for huge levels of pollution and forest degradation and destruction, particularly in the aviation, global commodity food and mining industries. It has also promoted the idea that forests are **Carbon Sinks**, reducing their complex and interrelated cycles and functions to that of storing carbon. REDD+ distracts from the real causes of deforestation, and prevents the implementation of more suitable policies and actions that would halt deforestation.*

[What do Forests have to do with Climate Change, Carbon Markets and REDD+? A toolkit for community activists](#) (WRM, 2017)

REDD+ did not originate from forest communities and its exponents tend to place the blame for deforestation on peasant and forest people's agricultural practices, while failing to address the large-scale drivers of such deforestation. Most REDD+ activities impose restrictions on community use of forests, and these are often quite severe. Shifting cultivation, gathering and other subsistence activities are usually prohibited in REDD+ areas, with the restrictions regularly enforced with the support of armed guards. Corporate destruction of forests, for its part, continues unhindered by REDD+.

[REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies](#) (WRM, 2014)

Offsetting

Offsetting is a concept that has been creeping into UN climate and forest-related negotiations and many international programs and initiatives. In order to understand the rationale behind this concept, whether linked to biodiversity, carbon, water or others, it is important to bear the following in mind: offsetting destroys forests as it allows the dominant fossil-fuel dependent economic model to continue to thrive and expand. Rather than halting the destruction of territories and forests, offsetting can only exist if there is further destruction, which needs to be "compensated" for elsewhere. Offsetting is based on the simplistic assumption that two places can be "equivalent". It does not consider all of the interrelations, diversity and uniqueness in time and space of each location.

[Trade in Ecosystem Services. When Payment for Environmental Services delivers a Permit to Destroy](#) (WRM, 2014)

[Destroy Here and Destroy There: The Double Exploitation of Biodiversity Offsets](#) (WRM Bulletin 232, July-August 2017)

[Regulated Destruction: How Biodiversity Offsetting enables environmental destruction](#) (Friends of the Earth International)

*The logic behind offsetting is also being applied to programs that do not include the word "offset", such as **Zero Net Deforestation**. However, behind the new name the same rationale persists. The corporate commitment to Zero Net Deforestation may sound uplifting, but the word **Net** is crucial. This term simply means that deforestation can happen and forests destroyed, as long as the total area covered by forest within a given geography remains unchanged. It means that an oil palm*

plantation company, for example, is allowed to destroy a forest as long as it “compensates” that destruction by conserving a “comparably sized” forest in terms of biodiversity elsewhere. All the company has to do is come up with a story that suggests that this other forest would be at risk of destruction without their “compensation” project.

[OLAM Palm Gabon pretends to use the Forest Definition to Implement its Zero Deforestation Pledge](#)
(WRM Bulletin 245, September 2019)

Nature-Based-Solutions (also called Natural Climate Solutions)

*This is the latest concept that the fossil fuels industry has begun to push along with conservationist NGOs. Their goal: to prevent their pollution records and socio-environmental disasters from forming part of climate negotiations. After 14 years of failing to reduce deforestation, the same **REDD+** proponents are now claiming to have a new answer - now called Nature-Based-Solutions. The logic remains that of previous failed concepts such as REDD+: **offsetting**. Roughly three-quarters of the activities now labelled Nature-Based-Solutions either involve planting trees (industrial plantations) or forest restoration (conservation areas).*

However, this concept simply leads to further forest destruction, giving new names to previous false solutions such as offsetting and REDD+. As before, Nature-Based-Solutions will leave the drivers of large-scale deforestation unaddressed, while drawing attention away from the urgent need to leave fossil fuels in the ground.

[Natural Climate Solutions](#) (REDD-Monitor)

[Launched at COP25, IETA's Markets for Natural Climate Solutions is Greenwash for the Oil Industry](#)
(REDD-Monitor, December 2019)

Safeguards or Voluntary Guidelines

*Companies, banks, development agencies and conservationist NGOs promote safeguards or voluntary guidelines (for so-called best practices) as a tool to avoid government regulations. Such entities promise to regulate their activities, based on the **standards, guidelines** or **indicators** that they themselves create. Lacking any legal basis, these voluntary standards give the impression that industry is regulated, that things are “safe” and that something is being done to make industrial activities “better”. However, safeguards or voluntary guidelines kill forests as they allow destructive activities to continue and expand, divide communities, weaken resistance and allow the perpetrators of deforestation and land grabbing to operate with impunity.*

[Honduras and the Consultation Law: A Trap that Seeks to Advance Capitalism onto Indigenous Territories](#) (WRM Bulletin 234, November 2017)

Safeguards and voluntary guidelines have come to form an integral part of the “checklists” of companies and banks. They have opened the door for companies to continue to engage in business as usual, even if it causes environmental and social destruction that banks claim not to be funding and companies claim not to be causing any longer. The World Bank, for example, has its own safeguards and social and environmental standards for the projects it funds. However, all of these are voluntary, and the entity has revised and diluted them over time in order to provide even greater flexibility in the “requirements” needed for investing in forest areas.

Developing, updating and monitoring these safeguards and standards has also become a highly lucrative business for consulting firms.

[Safeguarding Investment: Safeguards for REDD+, Women and Indigenous People](#) (WRM Bulletin 211, February 2015)

Planted forests

*“Planted forests” is a contradiction in terms, as it is only possible to plant a tree, not a forest. This concept is based on the **FAO definition of forests**, and industrial monoculture tree plantation companies are its biggest beneficiaries. FAO’s definition reduces a forest to any area covered by trees, thus leaving aside other life forms as well as the biological, cyclical and cultural diversity that define a forest in terms of its continuous interconnection with forest-dependent communities. National forest statistics count these industrial monocultures as forests, despite the well-documented social and environmental impacts such plantations have had around the world.*

[Forest Definition](#) (WRM)

The definition of forests is a highly political issue. It also has serious social and environmental consequences for forest-dependent communities. FAO’s definition is the most widely used forest definition today and serves as a guide for national forest definitions worldwide. It is also an important reference in international fora such as the UN climate negotiations. For example, the UN Paris Agreement uses FAO’s forest definition and thus promotes industrial tree monocultures under the guise of a positive image of forests.

[Local Struggles Against Plantations](#) (WRM)

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