

International Year of the Forest 2011

A FERN ForestWatch special

Forests are in crisis – still despite nearly two decades of intergovernmental negotiations on addressing the forest crisis, despite decades of campaigning, and despite incremental changes and adjustments of policy and law. This is the discouraging truth. In its assessment, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) stated that deforestation continues at about 13 million hectares per year.¹ Even these figures are highly misleading: among many other problems, they do not reflect significant forest loss through degradation (for example, crown cover must drop to below 10 per cent before it is included in “deforestation.”)² Climate change threatens to destroy forests further; the onset of Amazon forest collapse is predicted with a 2.5°C temperature rise.³ As governments will start to scramble to address the growing impacts of climate change, decision-making processes stand to become more disjointed, and less effective. Yet, or maybe because of this, the United Nations General Assembly has issued the proclamation that 2011 is to be the International Year of Forests.⁴ Will this bold proclamation trigger equally bold and urgently needed decisive action to actually halt forest loss or will decision-makers at all levels, from CEOs, to secretaries general, to ministers reduce the opportunity to a public relations stunt?

The reality is that forests will not remain standing unless the long list of underlying drivers of forest loss - from poor government policies and over-consumption, to the price of forest and agricultural products - are addressed.⁵ Attention to these underlying causes has been notably absent from the nearly two decades of UN debate about how to halt the forest crisis.

Positive developments are few and far between, but the decades of talking have led to a better understanding that good forest governance, and ecological and social performance are central pillars of sustainability – not so long ago, sustainability was measured solely as maintaining a sustained yield of timber. There is also today a wider acknowledgement that much timber extraction is in fact illegal; and that responsible decision making about forest use must involve all stakeholders and rightsholders in discussions concerning forest use that will affect them. These successes have been won in part due to the enormous strength of social and indigenous peoples’ movements. Yet acknowledgments on paper are still a far cry from changing how the business of forestry is conducted in the forest.

In this special, FERN highlights some of the prominent debates pertaining to forests, debates that shape FERN’s work - before, during and after the International Year of Forests.

Forests in Europe

Thirty-five per cent of the world’s certified forests (almost 87 million hectares) are in Europe.⁶ Despite this, biodiversity is declining and threats are increasing. Causal factors include increased harvesting for bioenergy, intensive forestry management, loss of land to urban sprawl and roads, and climate change. To reverse some of these trends and halt the further degradation of forests in Europe, we must scale back consumption of forest products to be more in keeping with what forests can supply. We must examine whether EU monies should be focused on supporting small, locally relevant schemes that can incentivise forest restoration and the growing of more diverse and thus, resilient forests. Strong sustainability criteria are required for biomass, along with an acknowledgement that such criteria can work only if total energy consumption is drastically reduced. New demand for biomass must not just be added to already existing pressure to increase the intensity of forestry management and biomass should only be used where it is most efficient, stimulating local and rural development rather than a greater influx of imports.

Certification

In contemporary discussions about forest use, certification is a hugely divisive topic. Work on certification has certainly been influential and successful in increasing the understanding that social, ecological and economic issues are equally important and must be balanced if forests are to be managed well. An important step towards ensuring that such balance is achieved is to ensure balanced participation of stakeholder groups at the table to discuss issues, and for an enabling environment in which controversial issues are not avoided, but addressed. The importance of a multi-stakeholder process is now widely accepted – a great step forward. However, when it comes to implementation, actual change in ‘how things are done’ is hard to find. What’s more, efforts of initiatives such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) national standard setting initiatives and international policy setting processes show that balanced voting power in processes does not necessarily lead to ‘equal representation’.

Too many forest products carrying sustainability labels come from forests that are not managed in the responsible manner that consumers believe the label guarantees; worse, market pressure to deliver more certified timber risks leading certification schemes to downgrade their standards so they can deliver the demanded volume. In all, voluntary certification appears to have reached the limit of what it can contribute to better forest management.



Forest Governance

If certification has reached its limits in advancing the debate about responsible forest management, which other policy initiatives can contribute to better forest use and protection? Forest governance is a term that captures where action is needed if forests are to be managed well and responsibly: Increased transparency, participatory decision-making, and accountability systems all need to be in place to improve the fate of the world's forests. Achieving such changes will require capacity among non-state actors and governments alike to tackle these topics – and capacity will need to be paired with the will to rebalance the power among those who make decisions about forests today and those who are most affected by those decisions but rarely have a say in the decision-making.

Forests are often contested 'resources' and the starting point for any resolution must be for warring parties to agree on who holds which rights to what use of the forest. In all discussions, it is important that the issues pertaining to forest peoples' rights are prioritised above the needs of stakeholders. In that sense, the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) action plan has proven to be a noteworthy step toward addressing intricate, complex issues and leading to processes of forest law reform in a number of countries. 2011 offers a good opportunity to build on the successes of voluntary partnership agreement (VPA) processes in addressing previously ignored forest governance and forest peoples' rights issues, and to use the new illegal timber regulation in the EU and the U.S. Lacey Act to halt the import of illegally logged timber. Fifteen years ago, people were not even talking about such bold moves. The fact that these things now take place is a significant, but not infallible,⁷ improvement.

Forests and climate

Welcome as they are, the improvements in governance and the protection of intact forests that local struggles have achieved, are put at risk through government inaction on tackling climate change. Healthy forests are key for a healthy environment. Increased interest in the climatic role of forests has taken attention from tackling the drivers of deforestation and put it towards counting carbon emissions. It has been a text book example of how an essentially political issue has been turned into a technical debate about error margins, default values and methodology tiers – a debate that not only excludes most of those dependent on forests and first in line to

bear the impacts of climate change, but that has also pushed forests into the fangs of the false solution that has paralysed the climate debate for the last 15 years: carbon trading. The motivations for calls to open access of the carbon markets to forests are manifold, and they range from Northern governments looking for new ways to further delay the required reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, to practitioners of community forestry schemes eager to try out a new potential funding source. One common characteristic of the discourse, irrespective of the motivation behind the call for forest carbon markets, is the near absence of reflection on how the reality of and experience with complex derivatives markets – in which forest carbon would eventually be traded – compares with the assumption of 'benefits for the poor' that is advanced by forest carbon trading advocates. FERN's investigations⁸ have shown that, although carbon markets deliver money to investors, traders and the world's most polluting companies, they have neither delivered investment in transformational renewable energy nor triggered a move to low-carbon economies. Few if any communities have seen the promised benefits from 'Clean Development' carbon offsets. Thus, assumptions that trading forests in carbon markets will halt deforestation, raise the money necessary to finance measures to end forest loss and benefit forest dependent communities also fail to stand up to closer scrutiny.⁹

That does not mean that money is not needed, but that processes need to be implemented which identify action to be taken to halt forest loss – and the costs to implement them - from the bottom up. Commitment from decision makers is needed to act upon the drivers of forest loss identified at local levels and in participatory processes. REDD - Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation - is not currently set up to develop responses based on the intimate knowledge of such local drivers of forest loss. By taking power away from the stewards of the forest and putting finance into the wrong hands, it will fail to save forests.

So much to do, so little time to do it. Thus, the International Year of Forests must result in more than just another glossy brochure. It must be the hook for meaningful action to tackle the underlying causes of forest loss. This can only be accomplished by acknowledging that consumption in European countries is not sustainable. Only when we reduce our own consumption, including energy consumption, and start to support the devolving of forest use decision making to local organisations in highly forested countries will we have set the global stage to move forward.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1757e/i1757e.pdf> Box 2

2. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1757e/i1757e.pdf> Annex 2

3. The Stern Review, 2007, p. 95

4. www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011/

5. www.puce.edu.ec/zoologia/vertebrados/personal/sburneo/cursos/EcologiaII/Bibliografia/2-5%20Deforestacion%20tropical.pdf

6. www.roadmap2010.eu/wisd/pdfs/18-29.pdf

7. For instance, see the Ghana's performance regarding implementation of the VPA agreement, FW 156.

8. www.fern.org/tradingcarbon

9. www.fern.org/tradingcarbon box 6