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Forests – a matter of money?!

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Forests – a matter of money?!

Bonn, 16 March 2009. Forest ecosystems cover around 30 % of the global land surface and are a vital part of the earth's life-support system that sustains human well-being. Forests are a key element of global climate stabilisation. On a local scale, they generate or recycle precipitation, improve drinking water quality, provide soil protection and buffer climatic extremes. Forest ecosystems account for a large part of the biological diversity of this planet. Yet, we do not value their services appropriately. Or how come a forest area the size of Greece is cleared every year? Our predominant human development model is incompatible with forest conservation. The history of human development, or the history of civilisation, is largely a history of deforestation, and generally a history of the degradation of the earth's ecosystems. However, societies which have adapted to the carrying capacity of their (forest) ecosystems have existed and still do. Since this kind of adaptation implies a restriction with regard to development in terms of e.g. growth of population and consumption, this development model did clearly not beat our predominant model of 'human' progress. The wiser ones gave way!?

There are several historical cases where environmental degradation, including deforestation, contributed to the collapse of societies. For are a couple of reasons industrial societies have so far escaped this fate. Unfortunately, the acknowledgement of limits to growth and the understanding that only sustainable development ensures stability and the continued existence of a society ... aren't among them.

Essential to the industrial society and its living standard has been and still is the spatial displacement of ecosystem degradation and destruction in the course of colonisation and later globalisation. Forests have and still do give way for human development; virtually, they have to fuel it. In the past for sugar cane free of charge, today for beef, soy, oil palm and furniture at world market prices. In addition, development in developing countries, simply following the model of the early industrialised countries, today still comes to a large extent at the price of deforestation and the degradation of other ecosystems.

It doesn't need a genius to figure out that such a course of action cannot go on without dire consequences. But which politician or entrepreneur can afford to call for sustainability at the price of jobs, short-term prosperity or rate of return. "Less" is not an option. A fatal system, in times of globalisation, a system without an acceptable emergency exit.

If one follows the logic of the system however, one of the most important reasons for deforestation is another one. *It's the economy, stupid!* Forests are not adequately economically valued, and, thus, are not respected by the 'developers'. While this argument is essentially right from the perspective of the system, it implies a very important fact: Even if we want to preserve a certain forest area, but this forest area has too little economic value, we simply cannot preserve it. Our decisions, our culture, are hence driven by our economic system. Doesn't that say a lot about our culture and about our freedom of choice?

The UN Forum on Forests and the Convention on Biological Diversity have so far proven inadequate to address deforestation seriously on a global scale. There has been no significant financial incentive, at least none of a scale sufficient enough to leverage the political will to tackle deforestation seriously. Under the Kyoto Protocol, forests were equally excluded. As the planet is ever more obviously heating up, and since deforestation accounts for roughly a fifth of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, forests are now back on the agenda of the



post 2012 climate agreement. In 2006, the Stern Report on the economics of climate change came out with a figure and everyone rushed in to grab it. Five billions a year to reduce 70 % of emissions from deforestation. This way, “avoided deforestation” became RED, then REDD and finally REDD plus (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). Soon 5 billion € became 15-25 billion €, maybe even more. And as the amount of money grew, so did the confidence of getting a grip on deforestation. A confirmation of the state of mind of mankind: it is merely a matter of money, right? Forgotten the root causes for deforestation and the central lessons learned from decades of futile tropical forest conservation programmes and projects? „Oh, come on man. Governance was yesterday. Let’s talk carbon“.

The likely integration of tropical forests into the post-2012 climate agreement under the synonym of REDD has triggered a hype around tropical forest conservation. REDD is seen by many as a last chance to engage in (tropical) forest conservation of scale while there are still large tracts of tropical forest left on earth (provided they do not collapse due to climate change). No doubt, we must make best use of this opportunity, even if the billions necessary to leverage the political will is a confession of our cultural poverty. What does it matter?

But does the monetarization of forest carbon change anything and is compensation for avoided deforestation all that needs to be done? Who guarantees that CO₂ prices beat prices for beef, soy, palm oil or timber? Will an increasing number of people with a growing living standard eat less beef and consume less agro-fuels than today? And even if the CO₂ price is kept artificially high, what will all the people making a living out of deforestation do? Will saw and pulp mills be closed because one can earn more money with CO₂ than with timber, and will all the people find alternative employment? Certainly not.

Let’s face it. To get a serious and lasting grip on deforestation requires to deeply altering political and economic structures, both in developed and developing countries. The prospective billions which may flow via REDD under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change can sweeten, but not substitute, this step. Should we however stay loyal to the believe and aim that a growing number of people on this planet can live, eat and be as mobile as people in industrialised countries today, then forests and other ecosystems will continue to vanish. Stopping deforestation in the long-term means to accept the ecological imperative: This planet can in the long run only support a certain amount of people with a limited living standard. Do you remember 1972? Welcome again to the limits to growth.



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