



WORLD GROWTH

Forestry and Biodiversity:

A Healthy Report

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A great deal of criticism has been leveled at the global forest industry for its apparent contribution to biodiversity loss.

Those undertaking forestry in natural forests are accused of wholesale forest destruction, leading to significant biodiversity loss. At the same time, those in the private sector that are establishing forest plantations are accused of propagating “sterile monocultures” that harbor little or no biodiversity.

Consequently, the perception of forestry in the global environmental debate is that it is the enemy of flora and fauna.

This perception rests on two assumptions. First, that forestry – plantation or natural – is a major cause of deforestation and therefore biodiversity loss. Second, that forest plantations harbor no biodiversity.

While poor forest management of natural forests will inevitably lead to degraded forests or deforestation, the attribution of the majority of deforestation to the forest industry is unwarranted. Similarly, accusations against the plantation forest industry that it is responsible for the majority of forest loss are equally unwarranted.

Of all deforestation – that is land use conversion from natural forest to other uses – just 7 per cent can be attributed to plantation forestry. The remaining 93 per cent of the conversion is a function of agricultural expansion.

The world’s leading forest research organizations – FAO and CIFOR – appreciate that the causes of deforestation lie outside of the forest sector and that forestry on its own is not land-use change.

Linked into this is that a significant percentage of the world’s forests has been set aside for conservation. Globally, more than 11 per cent of the world’s total forest area has been designated biodiversity conservation. Since 1990, forest areas designated for conservation have risen by 32 per cent – an estimated increase of 96 million hectares since 1990.

The second assumption – that plantations harbor no biodiversity – is also without merit.

Numerous studies have concluded that plantation forests have higher biodiversity values than other landscapes used for agriculture. Moreover, they have found that when native species are used for plantation forestry there is very little difference between plantations and natural forests.

Recent research has also demonstrated clearly that plantations – native or exotic – serve natural forests and biodiversity much better than other land uses such as agriculture.

First, plantations do harbor biodiversity values. Studies in Latin America have indicated that they are particularly amenable to some species that are threatened or endangered.

Second, plantations are able to act as a buffer zone for forests that protect typical forest functions, and also inhibit encroachment by illegal loggers.

Third, the capacity of plantations to provide feedstock takes pressure off using natural forests for the supply of timber.

Why, then, has plantation forestry garnered such a reputation?

The perception of plantation forestry has largely been driven by environmental NGOs. It has been achieved through NGO definitions of forests that exclude plantation forestry, through the development of biodiversity metrics that preclude any biodiversity values within forests, and through conservation strategies that are at odds with economic development, particularly in developing countries.

Respected research bodies and intergovernmental organizations do not distinguish between plantation forests and forests. The definitions used by organizations such as the FAO place simple technical criteria upon what defines a forest. The FAO has previously advocated a ‘spectrum’ approach to forestry based on the level of management intensity within a forest. At one end there are intensively managed production plantations; at the other there is natural forest, devoid of management.

This has not been the case within conservation organizations and particularly among environmental NGOs.

The definition of forest landscapes used by Greenpeace is exclusive rather than inclusive. It is based on forest area rather than the biodiversity values it contains. It excludes forest areas that are interrupted by navigable rivers. It effectively sets out to communicate that there is less natural forest than there actually is.

The use of broader indicators that take in values other than biodiversity values – such as WWF’s high conservation value forest indicator – is effectively a conservation strategy rather than an indicator. Biodiversity is both complex and abstract. Its measurement defies simplistic indices or numbers. Moreover, the data on biodiversity in developing countries is poor, and the best way to conserve biodiversity is far from agreed.

Rather than seeking to conserve forests in areas that have already been designated as conservation areas using top-down national planning, HCVF seeks to employ land already designated for economic purposes for environmental purposes.

The danger here is twofold. First, poor countries need economic growth to manage their environment better; this can be seen in the fact that it is the world’s larger private resource firms have better environmental management systems. They are the ones that can afford them. It is no surprise that rates of deforestation and subsequent biodiversity loss taper off with increased living standards.

Second, reducing the productivity of land designated for economic purposes – by large firms or small landholders – places further economic burdens on poor populations. This, in turn, creates higher pressures on natural forest areas, whether designated for conservation or production.

This is particularly acute where there are high rates of population growth, or high rates of urbanization. These are precisely the areas that have been designated by NGOs as being particularly threatened; it is not surprising that publicizing ‘human animal conflict’ has been a publicity strategy for NGOs.

But using these conflicts for publicity masks a greater problem for NGOs – their strategy for biodiversity is effectively at odds with the economic needs of developing countries and also the Convention on Biological Diversity, which clearly makes the economic development a priority.

Rather than pressuring governments and the privates for greater protected areas in developing countries, campaigners should contribute to improving the management of existing conservation areas. For example, more than one quarter of Indonesia’s land area has been designated for conservation, but enforcement is still a problem. Campaigners have instead put resources into pressuring economically important industries.

In this regard, the question environmental campaigners should be broadened. They call for action to be taken, yet have few suggestions on who is to take the action.

NGOs need to decide if they are simply going to campaign against economic development in poor countries – which appears to be their current strategy – or if they actually want to give both the poor and the environment a stronger chance for survival



About World Growth

World Growth is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established with an educational and charitable mission to expand the education, information and other resources available to disadvantaged populations to improve their health and economic welfare. At World Growth, we embrace and celebrate the new age of globalization and the power of free trade to eradicate poverty and improve living conditions for people in the developing world.

Our Philosophy

World Growth believes that helping the developing world realize its full potential is one of the great moral aims for those of us fortunate to live in the wealthy developed world. We also believe that a misdiagnosis of what ails the underdeveloped world has yielded policy prescriptions that have been useless or even harmful to the world's "bottom billion."

World Growth believes that there is enormous untapped human and economic potential around the world. In order to unlock that potential, and allow the poorest of the world's poor a better life, it is necessary to realize changes in institutions and policies that permit growth and human flourishing.

Instead of aid and handouts, what the populations of developing countries need are social and political situations and infrastructure that foster productive economic activity and generate robust economic growth. These include, but are not limited to, property rights and protections, the rule of law, free markets, open trade, government accountability and transparency.

For too long, well-meaning governments, aid agencies and others have promoted policies that fail to address the true problems that afflict poor societies. As a result, too many people around the globe remained locked in pre-modern conditions where their talents and inherent capacities are shackled.

The people of the developing world are fully capable of helping themselves to ensure a more prosperous existence. The path to prosperity does not begin with handouts from the West. Instead it requires identifying the genuine obstacles to growth and highlighting paths to reform that will yield sustainable and lasting change.

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