

REDD Herring?

William Laurance (BioScience 58: 286–287, doi:10.1641/B580402) concluded that “REDD is becoming a reality, and might serve as a model of how environmental scientists can help affect international policy.” REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation) is another carbon trading scheme which seems to offer help in accomplishing this worthy goal.

Do we need another voluntary scheme to benefit the wealthy, while generating little for the people who live in tropical forests today and are under contract to cut trees for the already wealthy? Is this an appropriate action model deserving our support?

As Laurance prudently points out, implementing REDD will be fraught with uncertainties. The technical issues are solvable, but there are many hurdles. He asks whether it is appropriate to focus exclusively on carbon, as though forests have value only in terms of this element. He mentions biodiversity and the hydrological cycle as being important; both are essential, and both are threatened by deforestation and climate change.

REDD is reputedly designed to avoid the pitfalls of a project-by-project approach; it focuses at the national level. Yet there are no mechanisms to guarantee that carbon trading will also help the indigenous people and the traditional communities that live in, and depend on, the forest for their livelihood. In an increasingly urbanized world, these people are marginalized because they lack political clout. They depend on the goodwill of national politicians. Such support is highly volatile, especially in countries with high corruption indices.

Given these worries, a number of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations)—especially third world NGOs and indigenous peoples’ organizations present at the Bali meeting—questioned REDD’s adequacy and called for profound changes in both national and international policy. Their declaration on forests recommended that REDD be eliminated (FOEI 2008).

Instead of following another red herring that may simply divert our attention from controlling the most important

factors, should not the world’s scientific community ask that the major polluting countries address the root causes of carbon emissions, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and human inequities? The real problem is the growth-at-any-cost model of our political economy, and the neglect of human numbers.

Laurance ends by asking for sustainable resource-use policies. But there can be no sustainability until our numbers and our economic expectations are brought within the carrying capacity of the planet itself.

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[FOEI] Friends of the Earth International. 2008. Protecting the World’s Forests Needs More than Just Money. Amsterdam: FOEI. (3 July 2008; www.foei.org/en/campaigns/climate/kyoto-protocol/bali/forests-declaration)

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Better REDD than Dead (Response from Laurance)

Clement and Clement question whether REDD is worth pursuing because it faces practical hurdles, may not benefit rural communities, and could divert attention from root problems such

as overpopulation, human inequity, and unbridled economic growth.

These are undoubtedly important concerns, but I believe it would be nonsensical to throw the baby out with the bathwater simply because REDD does not solve all the planet’s problems. REDD provides a mechanism whereby wealthy nations can help to fund forest conservation in developing countries and thereby reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and it enjoys increasingly broad support in the scientific and policy communities.

Despite some practical hurdles, REDD is quickly becoming a reality. For instance, important initial strides have been made in the United States (the proposed Lieberman-Warner bill) and Europe (under the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme) to allow forest-carbon credits to be traded, which could soon open the door for large-scale REDD activities. The World Bank has also allocated \$300 million in 2008–2009 for exploratory REDD projects.

Moreover, it is highly unlikely that REDD will benefit only the wealthy. Although further work is needed to ensure that REDD is “pro-poor,” developing nations with weak fiscal transparency and little regard for their rural poor and indigenous peoples are unlikely to be favored by carbon-credit purchasers, who desire not just effective carbon offsets but also positive publicity for their efforts. Such market incentives will encourage developing nations to bolster their rural development programs as well as to combat illegal deforestation and logging.

Although it is no panacea, REDD could reduce the perverse economic incentives that presently favor rapid deforestation while aiding efforts to slow dangerous global warming. In my view, we should strongly support REDD, and simultaneously maintain clear-eyed efforts to attack other pressing global problems.

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