

A Modest Proposal for Wealthy Countries to Reforest Their Land for the Common Good

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ABSTRACT

We discuss a recent press release calling on wealthy countries to do more to combat climate change and protect their biodiversity. We examine some further examples of how questionable views are imposed unilaterally on conservation problems. Until we better engage with local perspectives we shall be less credible and less effective as conservationists.

Key words: Biofuel; conservation; deforestation; double-standards; ethics; inequity; oil-palm; REDD; restoration; tree-spiking; tropics.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

THE COALITION OF FINANCIALLY CHALLENGED COUNTRIES WITH LOTS OF TREES, KNOWN AS CoFCCLoT, representing most of the world's remaining tropical forests is asking wealthy nations to share global responsibilities and reforest their land for the common good of stabilizing climate and protecting biodiversity.

'We are willing to play our part, but we require a level playing field in which we all commit to equal sacrifices,' a coalition spokeswoman says. 'Returning forest cover in the G8 countries and the European Union back to historic levels will benefit all of us in the long-term.'

Seventy-five percent of Europe was once forested. Now it is 45 percent. Some countries such as Ireland saw their forest cover reduced to near zero. Most forest cover in the developed world is now planted with stands of alien trees, turning them into deserts for biodiversity. Remaining natural forests are often highly fragmented and have few native species.

'For all the forests we in Indonesia, Brazil or Central Africa do not cut down, G8 countries should reforest a similarly-sized area,' says the CoFCCLoT spokeswoman. 'Too many agricultural areas in Europe and the US are only kept in business because of tariffs and subsidies.'

CoFCCLoT members also ask why they are criticized for developing oil palm plantations, even though these produce much more biofuel and oil per unit area than temperate crops such as maize—and thus require much less land to satisfy global demands. With the world's population expected to reach 10.5 billion by 2050 it is crucial that food and fuel are produced efficiently, and where most population growth is expected.

CoFCCLoT points out that nature in wealthy nations needs urgent attention. 'Large areas are degraded. Soils are compacted, soil fauna depleted, and their hydrology disrupted and contaminated.'

The coalition says that if wealthy nations restore their forests, they can help slow climate change by absorbing atmospheric carbon and provide people with clean water and healthy soils. It also highlights the benefits for species diversity and environmental services.

CoFCCLoT notes the opportunities to reintroduce bears, lynx, wolves, beavers and other threatened animals that have been decimated or driven to extinction by rampant exploitation of natural forests in much of the industrialized world.

It says, too, that in the longer-term, ongoing climate change and reforestation may permit tropical mega-fauna to thrive in temperate countries. Lions could be reintroduced to Greece, CoFCCLoT suggests, and gorillas might thrive in Spain. Both countries face economic challenges that could be reduced by the revenues from ecotourism.

New markets for local handicrafts and also cultural entertainments are anticipated in G8 countries. These developments would reduce agricultural pressure on the forests.

CoFCCLoT expects that their member countries will provide funds for local capacity building, awareness raising, dealing with human wildlife conflicts and law enforcement in the United States, Japan, and Europe. 'The limited capacity in many of these regions is a concern. But we are willing to share our skills and experiences' says the spokeswoman.

The coalition acknowledges that their demands will meet some resistance. People might be scared to live near large forests with wild animals and may be resentful of not being allowed access to forest resources. 'But people will get used to it,' explains the spokeswoman.

Received 16 May 2011; revision accepted 4 June 2011.

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‘It is time to share these global responsibilities,’ she adds. ‘The G8 cannot have their cake and eat it too.’

SATIRE AS A SOURCE OF SERIOUS INSIGHT

‘I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled. . . .’ Thus wrote Jonathan Swift (1729) in what is considered the origin of satire. Swift’s aim was not to promote cannibalism but to expose and ridicule ethical inconsistencies in widespread views at that time (concerning the growing population of Irish poor).

Almost all the World’s environmental problems impact diverse people with different perspectives (Fig. 1). Inability to adequately acknowledge these differences and their implications can lead to disagreement, a failure to find common ground, and an inability to build the consensus required to implement solutions. The underlying issue is often the different ways that different participants may wish to frame an issue. Such differences can make it unclear what the problem is, who should be involved in the decision process and what is an appropriate course of action (Brugnach *et al.* 2010). While different views arise in many ways, western interests often believe that theirs is the only true and objective approach—while self-evidently false we may all be guilty of such judgments. It is hard to recognize and confront our own prejudices.

Here, following in Swift’s footsteps, we wish to highlight some inconsistencies regarding international agreements on land cover

and biodiversity conservation. Satire can help reveal the flaws inherent in the way we frame, formulate, and impose our views on different situations. While mockery is seldom an element in the scientific approach it may be especially effective in the context of ethics where the underlying logic and data are harder to assess and emotional content plays a major role. While we scientists consider ourselves experts on objective information we are much less competent with slippery subjective values—even though we are often unaware when we are crossing the line. Conservation science is especially vulnerable as it is about values as much as facts.

We do not intend to undermine conservation efforts but to clarify obstacles to which conservation is often blind. Such obstacles play a major role in the political impasse on combating climate change in which equal efforts in reducing greenhouse gas emissions are considered unfair by countries that have gained little from the industrialization responsible for the emissions but may suffer most (Buys *et al.* 2009). The obstacles also feature in the lack of progress biodiversity conservation is making in many tropical forest countries, where deforestation is seen as a major cause of biodiversity loss. Conflicting viewpoints arise because that same deforestation is also a driver of economic development. By exposing distorted viewpoints for what they are we hope a more effective and fair conservation agenda can be developed (Table 1).

Many of these issues have been written about at length in social sciences journals and other worthy fora (*e.g.*, Fairhead & Leach 1996, Guha & Martinez-Alier 1997, Guha 2003). Great stuff, but we suspect that these texts have seldom been examined let alone discussed by practicing tropical biologists—satire, by being



FIGURE 1. The Same Boat, Different Views. © Polyp.org.uk.

TABLE 1. *A range of conservation views that are either hidden or openly stated in western conservation agendas—a rich source of satire waiting for exploitation*

Conservation opinion the west has about tropical forest countries	Conservation opinion the west has about wealthy countries
Tropical deforestation creates 10% of the Earth's global carbon emissions and needs to be stopped. Keep at least half the land forested (it is a global responsibility)	Our deforestation has already happened, and there is no turning back (no apologies; no responsibilities). Reforesting temperate areas is not a cost-effective way to reduce carbon emissions
Cutting trees for timber is evil. It should be stopped	We need timber. Cutting trees for timber is a major part of our culture and supports communities
Plantations are not forests. They are evil destroyers of forest and wildlife	Plantations play a key role in our forest strategy. They have significant conservation value. They are part of a balanced countryside and harbor biodiversity
Support traditional lifestyles and keep development away from traditional peoples. Encourage them to accept conservation by offering new sources of income such as bee-keeping and traditional dancing for tourists	We want economic development for all. We keep traditions for Christmas. If you want to conserve my land, or to encourage any specific behaviors, you must pay me cash
These people need to play their part! Their consumption and carbon footprints need to be curtailed to save the planet. Global climate change will undermine food security (you should do your bit to help yourselves)	I have worked hard and deserve my car and foreign holidays. Let me just turn up the heating a moment . . . then I'll buy those plane tickets. I have nothing to feel guilty about, and even if I have a slight concern this can be absolved by hitting the "offset my emissions button"
We give you \$1 billion if you forego \$10 billion in economic development opportunities in forests. Your development is something we support but please ensure you do not harm the environment	We can't slow down our development, because we are in an economic crisis. After all, we were elected on our promises of economic prosperity
Soy beans, oil palm, and coffee are evil. They have destroyed vast areas of tropical rainforest – you are responsible	Even vegetarians eat soya. I buy palm oil as it is cheap (who has the time to read all those labels anyway?). We plant the most profitable crops we can of course. Without coffee I can't start in the morning
Large animals need to be protected from people. Hunting of those animals by local people is intolerable (even for subsistence)	People need to be protected from large animals. Hunting by local people is a popular recreation activity and major political lobby group
Your farmers and fishermen are a threat to the planet and its sustainability. Agriculture and fisheries should not destroy conservation values	We subsidize farmers and fishermen as the stewards of our land and waters. The industries have important cultural values and need to be subsidized to keep them competitive
Your growing populations are a threat to the planet; people should practice birth control	We are concerned about declining and aging populations, and need families to have more children. Immigrants are a threat to our livelihoods and cultures
We send you our experts who will tell you what to do	We know what we need to know or our researchers will find out for us. You should not be presumptuous enough to tell us what to do

entertaining, may make the message more palatable and thus more likely to reach its targets.

The point of Table 1 is not to make factual statements. Our point is that these opinions exist and feature to varying degrees in many interactions concerning international conservation. Certainly we are only looking at half the picture (what richer nations think)—but the point is that richer countries largely call the shots and often end-up feeling misunderstood.

In some cases there are subtle factors at work. As we have argued elsewhere all of us may be deeply deluded about tropical nature and the actions it would take to protect it (Sheil & Meijaard 2010). Few of us are good at recognizing different frames and viewpoints. Here we explore two further examples in which differing framing and perceptions have blocked the achievement of conservation solutions. Our conclusions highlight opportunities for a more explicitly pluralistic approach.

SPIKING TREES

Sungai Wain Protection Forest and Gunung Palung National Park, both in Kalimantan, Indonesia, were heavily impacted by illegal logging in the late 1990s, and authorities had failed to halt the cutting. Some concerned individuals proposed to these local authorities the use of tree spiking. The idea, which originated in the United States, is to negate the timber value of the trees by inserting nails in the trees making them difficult to cut and process into timber (Foreman & Haywood 1989). The local authorities agreed and various areas were spiked with the help of local people. The initiative was well publicized through local media and signs in the forest (Meijaard 2001).

Despite demonstrable success—all areas spiked are still standing today—and clear support from the Indonesian government, the method's association with North American radical eco-defenders,

led to vehement opposition from a U.S.A. government agency in Indonesia. Its arguments against spiking reflected the illegality and risks seen in the United States. Somehow images of eco-warrior anarchists clouded judgments.

There may be good arguments against using nails but if they exist they did not feature in the discussions. The result of this foreign opposition was that no conservation organization was willing to support or condone spiking, let alone replicate it elsewhere. Presumably these organizations did not want to be associated with activities that powerful U.S.A. donors consider unacceptable. Tree spiking was thus not pursued in Indonesia despite its potential value. We note inconsistency with the use of lethal force in anti-poaching efforts elsewhere in the tropics (Neumann 2004). Maybe because gun use is legal in the U.S.A. this is more acceptable than theoretical dangers posed by nails in trees. We shall leave the appropriate satirical proclamations to the readers' imagination.

OIL PALM ATE OUR CHILDREN

Many conservation groups consider oil palm plantations a major threat to tropical biodiversity (Fitzherbert *et al.* 2008, Koh & Wilcove 2009, Sheil *et al.* 2009). The biggest producers, Indonesia, and Malaysia, consider oil palm a route to economic development. Oil palm is cheap, grows fast, and for the same amount of land it produces much more oil than other crops. Disputes focus on whether or not oil palm is a major factor in deforestation, carbon emissions and poverty alleviation, as well as palm oil's potential as a biofuel and important food crop, and whether oil palm development threatens biodiversity (Sheil *et al.* 2009). Viewpoints are polarized to the point that very few seek middle ground and compromise solutions (Meijaard 2010). Initiatives such as the Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil, developed to provide a common platform for different viewpoints, appear insufficient to address the concerns of either the industry or the environmental sector (McCarthy & Zen 2010). Progress could be made by determining and clarifying areas of agreement and disagreement. For example, recognizing that oil palm contributes to economic development, how can developments be guided at a broader scale to reduce deforestation (Angelsen 2010). Both parties, those for and those against, may benefit from the polarized debate as it helps to maintain support from their respective constituents. Conservation agencies value their purist image, while palm growers find it easy to dismiss unrealistic demands.

If we were to develop a satire on oil palm we might highlight definitions of a forest in Europe vs. one in Malaysia. In Malaysia, it was recently considered to include oil palm plantations as forest and thus contribute to the country's statistics on forest cover (Simamora 2010). Many conservation bodies have highlighted this as unacceptable (Biofuels Watch 2010, World Rainforest Movement 2010), and The Food and Agricultural Organization excludes oil palm from global forest estimates as it considers it an agricultural crop (FAO 2010). On the other hand, in much of the temperate world, exotic pulp wood plantations are included as forests. A level playing field requires that we can all agree on what makes a forest (Sasaki & Putz 2009). [Correction added after 8/22/2011: original wording changed.]

SYNTHESIS

Our nature-biased views are a strong motivator for conservation action but they can also blind us to alternative perspectives. If we hear that local people strongly support local oil palm development, we ignore it as an aberration or insist that they do not fully understand the associated ecological costs; if someone tells us they oppose such developments we use it for our cause. This may help win battles but undermines long-term solutions. Many people in the tropics express feelings of injustice regarding how conservation is judged and implemented (Meijaard & Sheil 2008). To us that is a major concern as the world becomes more democratic. We need to be aware of different viewpoints, trying to understand, qualify and quantify them, and find ways to incorporate them into conservation solutions. This might feel like diluting our agenda, but the costs of not doing this outweigh the benefits.

We need to rethink our judgments and roles in conservation. Opening our eyes to inequity and double standards helps level the playing field and clarifies communication and debate. With the economic balance in the world shifting east and south, conservation power and ethical thought will similarly change. The sooner we recognize this and respond the more conservation stands to gain. CoFCCLoT has a point and we need to hear it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank CoFCCLoT for stimulating our thinking, Andrew J. Marshall, Lian Pin Koh, Elizabeth Law, and Rhett Butler for their comments, Robin McDowell of Associated Press for editing the CoFCCLoT press release, and Paul Fitzgerald 'Polyp' for giving permission to use his cartoon. We thank Jaboury Ghazoul, *Biotropica's* editor for seriously considering our paper for publication, and two anonymous reviewers for their support.

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