

REDD+ : Conservation's Role in the Fight Against Climate Change

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change program on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing is moving towards including tropical forest conservation in addition to sustainable forestry practices in its Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism. Including conservation in REDD - making REDD into REDD+ - draws attention to the huge potential of carbon sequestration through wilderness protection.

Wild nature and wilderness areas - on land and sea - are critically important from a climate change perspective: they keep large amounts of carbon locked up, they absorb carbon out of the atmosphere, and they help people, plants and animals adapt to the effects of climate change.

The role of tropical forests in particular has received much attention in recent years as new data indicated that about 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions came from tropical deforestation - more than the entire transportation sector worldwide. This prompted conservationists to point out that saving tropical forests could not only take a big bite out of greenhouse gas emissions, it could also generate massive social and biodiversity benefits. Why not reward the countries, and in particular the local communities and indigenous peoples who have been good forests stewards, sometimes for centuries or even millennia? Providing an incentive to protect tropical forests would save endangered species, support often impoverished communities, and help solve the climate crisis, all at the same time. The mechanism proposed for accomplishing all of the above was called REDD, which stands for Reducing Emissions for Deforestation and Degradation.

Unfortunately, early versions of REDD design didn't focus on conservation - they focused more on sustainable logging. The rationale from the forest sector was that if you improve logging practices and log forests selectively you can reduce emissions. In some cases that's true, but a number of parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change led by the Coalition of Rainforest Nations argued that we could do better: the debate shouldn't just be about logging more effectively and releasing a little bit less carbon, it should be about protecting the vast carbon stocks locked up in forests. REDD shouldn't act as a subsidy to industrial logging companies - it should focus on maximizing these carbon stocks and providing the social and biodiversity benefits this planet desperately needs.

Fortunately, this message seems to have been heard. Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, recently emphasized in a talk at the United Nations Forum on Forests in New York City that

REDD really needed to be “REDD+” i.e. REDD had to include conservation and the enhancement of carbon stocks in existing forests, not just sustainable management of forests. This shift has also been reflected in official UNFCCC documents. Parties to the UNFCCC are moving in this direction as well. It represents important progress in the fight against global warming.

REDD+ is an improvement but by no means a perfect solution – fundamental challenges with REDD design remain, including but not limited to the sustainable forestry issue mentioned above. How to reward countries financially for their conservation efforts, how to build technical capacity so that countries can measure their forest loss and degradation accurately, and how to ensure that the rights of local and indigenous communities are respected are all critical challenges. Failing to address any one of these concerns could drastically reduce REDD’s effectiveness, or keep it from working altogether.

REDD is also just a partial approach: it only addresses incentives for conservation in tropical forests, so it does not maximize the carbon sequestration potential of natural systems worldwide – nor their social and biodiversity benefits. That said, it is an important part of the solution, and leaving conservation out of REDD would have been a monumental missed opportunity. It now looks as if REDD+ is safely in place for the climate talks in Copenhagen this December, where parties will negotiate a framework for a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. That’s an important step in the right direction – for people, for biodiversity, and for our climate.