

# Wrong road to Cancún

editorial by the World Rainforest Movement

The World Rainforest Movement (WRM) is an international organisation that, through its work on forest- and plantation-related issues, contributes to bringing about recognition of and respect for local peoples' rights over their forests and territories.

**T**he pulp and paper industry has grown over the years through an expansion of monoculture tree plantations over millions and millions of hectares of land. Disguised as “forests”, these “green deserts” have encroached on vast territories and rich ecosystems of poor countries. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has helped to perpetuate this distortion by including tree plantations in its definition of “forests”, under the category of “planted forests”. Other UN bodies, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognise the FAO’s definition.

But for communities whose land, soil, water resources, livelihoods and culture are devastated by monoculture tree plantations, the difference between a rich biodiverse forest and the barren life of an industrial tree plantation is crystal clear. These communities are being joined by a growing chorus of environmental and other organisations that also believe that “tree plantations are not forests”. The Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC) – a large world professional society on tropical forests – recently released a resolution urging the UN to remove tree plantations from its definition of “forest”. The importance of a true and genuine definition of “forest” is crucial for the future of the world’s forests.

Forests are increasingly subject to exploitation by corporate interests, who look at the rich complexity of forests with reductionist eyes. For forest peoples, the forest not only provides them with food, clothing, medicines, fuel and livelihoods but is also the schoolhouse of their children and the resting place of their ancestors. For big logging, oil, mining, pharmaceutical, or pulp and paper companies, such biodiversity-rich ecosystems are just a source of a single profitable commodity – whether wood, oil, gold, diamonds, or genetic resources.

This reductionist approach to forests is now being applied to an even less tangible “product”: carbon. Forests are now being referred to as “carbon stocks” that can be traded in the global carbon market through a mechanism called “Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” (REDD), which has quickly become one of the main topics of discussion for governments within the UNFCCC negotiations.

Several rounds of talks are under way in the lead-up to the next International Climate Change Conference in Cancún, Mexico at the end of this year. Up to now, these negotiations have focused on guidelines for carbon reporting and assessment that will facilitate “creative” accounting and allow polluting countries to escape obligations to reduce their emissions.

At the same time, real proposals for addressing climate change are being ignored, such as those agreed upon at the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in April 2010 in Bolivia. The People’s Agreement from that Conference states:

*The definition of forests used in the negotiations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which includes plantations, is unacceptable. Monoculture plantations are not forests. Therefore, we require a definition for negotiation purposes that recognizes the native forests, jungles and the diverse ecosystems on Earth.*

Forest peoples themselves are also making their voices heard. For instance, the Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola communities in Cameroon are speaking out against REDD projects that the Cameroon government is attempting to put in place with funding from the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility.

While the present climate crisis demonstrates the fundamental problems with the dominant global development paradigm, its driving forces are reluctant to change. This is why “solutions” for climate change are being devised around carbon trading and offsetting and the use of markets as financial mechanism for programmes and action. Such business incentives will fail to transform the processes and players that are at the root of the climate crisis – particularly large corporations – and will contribute to keeping “business as usual”. They are a distraction from the urgent measures that must be taken to cut fossil-fuel emissions at source.

Within such a context, carbon shopping in forests is clearly the wrong road to Cancún.