

From Rio to Johannesburg

Too Much Talk, Too Little Action on Forests *by Janet N. Abramovitz, Worldwatch Institute*

WORLD SUMMIT POLICY BRIEFS



At the Earth Summit in Rio, forests were a major focus, and point of contention, as they have been in the years since. But despite the official attention and rhetorical commitment to forests, the last decade was marked largely by government inaction-and declining forests. During the next decade, governments must take a decidedly more active course in order to sustain the world's remaining forests.

In Rio, governments were unable to agree on a forest convention, which was to have been the third jewel in the Summit crown (with climate and biodiversity). Instead, they negotiated a set of non-legally binding forest principles and a chapter on "Combating deforestation" within Agenda 21 (the official post-Summit agenda).

Since Rio, governments have continued talking and debating, but have done little else. In 1995, the UN reviewed progress on forests since Rio and set up the ad-hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, which in turn spawned the ad-hoc Intergovernmental Forum on Forests, which in turn beget the permanent UN Forum on Forests in 2001. But the principles and proposals generated at these talk shops were broad and without concrete goals, targets, or timetables, nor were they

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legally binding. Not surprisingly, few governments have felt compelled to act.

How well have governments done in "Combating Deforestation"? Agenda 21 called on nations to "maintain existing forests" and "sustain and



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expand areas under forest and tree cover." Unfortunately, the high levels of natural forest loss during the 1980s—over 16 million hectares per year—continued unabated during the 1990s, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. (The area lost during the last 20 years is larger than the size of India.)

Evidence from independent monitors reveals that actual forest loss has been much higher than official estimates, and that rampant illegal logging and trade are speeding up the pace of destruction. The massive scale of these activities is coming to light. In Indonesia, about two-thirds of all wood is harvested illegally and the government loses at least \$600 million a year as a result; and in Brazil the government estimates 80 percent of logging is illegal. High levels have been reported in Russia, Africa, and elsewhere.

The most productive developments for forests in the last 10 years, and those that hold the most promise for the future, have taken place largely outside official processes.

Concerned citizen groups and governments have been forming new partnerships that are bearing fruit in improved forest monitoring, management, and law enforcement. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), made up of industry and NGOs, has significantly accelerated the evolution of sustainable forest management. The FSC certification process has empowered consumers to demand better forest management through the marketplace, and rewarded sustainable operations for their efforts. Consumer boycotts in Europe of Canadian timber forced the government of British Columbia to reform their forest management practices.

The work of non-governmental monitoring and activist groups has forced governments to acknowledge the existence of illegal logging and trade and take actions to combat them. Brazil banned the harvest and export of mahogany. Several European nations and the U.S. have impounded imports of Brazilian mahogany. Another sign of progress is the commitments made by in the Ministerial Declaration of the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance Conference in Bali in September 2001.

Recommendations

Governments at the World Summit should commit to action, not talk. The world's forests and peoples can-

not afford another decade of delay. Governments do not have to wait for consensus to act to sustain forests, nor do they need a new global forest convention. (Indeed, pursuing a new convention would actually slow real progress by diverting scarce resources and delaying actions. A new convention would take 10 years or more to negotiate and come into force, and would likely appeal to the "lowest common denominator.")

To achieve tangible progress in combating deforestation, governments should commit to work in partnership with civil society to:

Eliminate illegal logging and trade

Governments must step up the enforcement of domestic and international laws against illegal logging and trade. Corruption and illegal activity destroys forests, and bankrupts treasuries, funds criminal activities, and undermines the rule of law. The billions of dollars now lost to national treasuries could instead be used for productive purposes such as erasing debt and eliminating the need to swallow further onerous economic adjustment programs. In addition, unless illegal and corrupt logging and trade are brought under control, it will be difficult for law abiding forest industries to compete, and virtually impossible for sustainable forest management to become standard practice. A World Summit initiative on illegal logging and trade would be welcome, if it

enhances, rather than supercedes, programs that are already producing results.



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Reduce unsustainable levels of consumption

Seventy-seven percent of the world's commercial timber harvest is consumed by the 22 percent of the world's people that live in North America, Europe, and Japan. China is now the world's 2nd largest consumer (including large quantities of illegally harvested timber). Nations can reduce overall demand through such measures as increasing reuse, recovery and recycling, improving materials use efficiency, and eliminating wasteful consumption.

Improve and accelerate forest monitoring

Forest monitoring by governments is woefully inadequate. Currently 75 percent of developing countries have either never carried out a forest inventory or have done only one. Even many industrial countries have questionable data on forest area, and little data on forest health and quality. Independent groups have had

local and global communities.

Increasing the area of forest certified to FSC standards, and expanding the area certified in developing nations. Currently 80 percent of the FSC-certified acreage is in Europe and the U.S.

Uphold the rights of forest dependent peoples.

At least 500 million of the world's poorest people depend directly on forests, according to the Center for International Forestry Research.

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much success in monitoring forest conditions, assessing the veracity of official data, tracking illegal forest destruction, and providing reliable data. Governments and donors should build on these non-governmental successes and commit to ensuring rigorous and repeated assessments of forest cover and quality using field and satellite measurements in every nation in the next five years. These data must be publicly available.

Adopt better forest management strategies including:

Ending the practice of cutting natural forest to establish plantations. About half of all plantations established worldwide in the 1990s came at the expense of natural forests, according to UNFAO. For plantations to fill the role of reducing pressure on primary or old growth forests (as called for in Agenda 21) they must be established on degraded and unoccupied land rather than natural forest.

Restoring forested landscapes to provide the full array of goods and services (such as forest products, watershed protection and carbon sequestration) to

Governments should stop expropriating and exploiting forests in the name of poverty reduction and national development in ways that impoverish forest dependent people. All too often, governments prohibit small scale and local use while subsidizing the destruction of vast tracts of forest by commercial interests. Such policies run counter to the oft-stated goals of sustainable forestry management and the alleviation of poverty.

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