Commodifying Nature: Stealing the Jungles?

According to ecological groups, a climate change programme at the United Nations, called REDD, may be facilitating the theft of the earth's remaining reserves of forest and jungle.

A recent ecological conference in Chiapas, Mexico, raised concerns as to REDD involvement in indigenous issues, as related to forests and climate change. The conference, which took place in San Cristobal de las Casas in the first week in May, was entitled Escuela de la Sustentabilidad de Amigos de la Tierra de América Latina y el Caribe and was one in a series of open and public conferences allowing discussion and input on the ongoing work of a number of affiliated ecological groups.

The focal point of the first day of open meetings pinpointed the UN program, REDD, which is an acronym for “Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation.” According to the UN, REDD has been developed to protect the forests in pursuit of reducing carbon emissions which come from deforestation:

“The UN-REDD Programme supports nationally-led REDD + processes and promotes the informed and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders, including Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent communities, in national and international REDD+ implementation.”

However, the reality of REDD is something quite different from its website pronouncements. Case after case has been cited where REDD has been used as a mechanism to speciously rob indigenous communities, living in jungles or forests, of their rights to their land.

According to conference speakers, indigenous communities are being presented with documents to sign which effectively mitigate or entirely remove the rights of the communities to work or live on the land which they have occupied for centuries. These documents may provide the promise of financial inducements, usually fairly small or may be unclear as to the repercussions that will incur. Upon signing, the inhabitants of these forest communities may lose their rights to work the land, fish or engage in other sustenance-producing activities. In fact, they may be forcibly removed from their land and homes.

At least one case was cited in which, when a community in Guatemala refused to sign the documents, a massacre ensued and the inhabitants of the community were slaughtered.

This citation gains credence given reports coming from Kenya, where REDD is also in operation. Recent articles cite evictions tied to the REDD funding programs in the Kenyan Cherangany Hills, where paramilitary groups working for the Kenyan police are now violently evicting the indigenous populations, as well as burning down their houses in efforts to remove them from their REDD-managed land.

The REDD program in Kenya is funded by the World Bank.
The Chiapas conference presented information concerning “tree plantations,” which are being planted in the wake of deforestation, which appears to be ongoing under REDD. While REDD maintains that its aim is to protect forests, often forests are destroyed under REDD and tree plantations are erected as a substitute and to purportedly offset the released carbon.

These tree plantations are usually monoculture, and either African palm or Jatropha is planted, according to Cristian Santiago, who works with the ecological group Otros Mundos. Santiago states that these tree plantations are producing biofuels. “These plantations are profitable for the involved corporations,” he says. “What is happening is that they are destroying natural reserves, forcibly relocating the communities, and planting tree farms for their own profit.”

Concerns were also raised at the conference concerning the involvement not only of corporations, but also of foreign governments. California’s plan to invest in indigenous forests in order to offset its own carbon emissions was cited, as well. In 2010, California signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Chiapas, Mexico and Acre, Brazil which would allow for California to pay hundreds of millions in taxpayer monies to “protect” foreign forests, in order to offset California’s own carbon emissions. Recently, the California Legislature has been considering SB 605, which would limit the international carbon trade of California. The bill has been tabled in the Assembly after passing in the Senate.

Acceding to public pressure, the government of Chiapas has attempted to back out of the California scheme. However, money has already passed hands and the fate of this project remains unclear. And if “REDD is dead” in Chiapas at this juncture, it appears to be live and kicking elsewhere in Mexico.

Other organizations have warned against REDD’s impact on indigenous groups. The International Forum of Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change, which is the indigenous caucus to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), has issued this statement on REDD:

“REDD will not benefit Indigenous Peoples, but, in fact, it will result in more violations of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights. It will increase the violation of our Human Rights, our rights to our lands, territories and resources, steal our land, cause forced evictions, prevent access and threaten indigenous agriculture practices, destroy biodiversity and culture diversity and cause social conflicts. Under REDD, States and Carbon Traders will take more control over our forests.”

Cristian Santiago cited a number of Latin American coup d'etats in recent years in which Latin American governments resistant to corporate forest takeovers were forcibly removed. He named Monsanto as a shadow partner in the coups, which took place in Paraguay in 2012 and in Honduras in 2009. Both countries had been previously involved in ALBA, (Alliance Boliviana for the Americas), an intergovernmental group supporting economic and political integration of Latin America. ALBA has been opposed by the United States government.

The Chiapas conference discussed strategies to reduce the potential for what amounts to land grabs under REDD. Also under discussion were paradigm changes in terms of the way forests are being viewed. The conference was organized by the Federacion de Amigos de la Tierra de Latinoamerica y Caribe. Represented were a number of ecological groups, including Otros Mundos, CEIBA (Guatemala), CENSAT (Columbia), COECOCEIBA (Costa Rica), Amigos de la Tierra (Argentina), Sobrevivencia (Paraguay), Madre Tierra (Honduras), CESTA (El Salvador) and Redes (Uruguay).

Joan Dark, New-York based independent researcher, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".