Rainforest Conservation and Natural Capital: Putting a Price on Life with the Complicity of ¨Progressives¨

2 MAY 2017

The faltering global economy needs new resources to invest in. What could be more valuable than life itself?

According to the New York Times, the ¨Save the Rainforest¨ campaign of 10 years ago forced through changes such as the moratorium on clearing forests for the production of soy which dramatically slowed deforestation across the Amazon basin.[1] The truth is though that the rate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon was slowing dramatically from 2004, prior to the much-hyped ¨Save the Rainforest¨ campaign and the subsequent soy moratorium agreed upon in 2006.

Between 2004 and 2006, deforestation in the Amazon basin fell by half. This was mainly the result of government concessions to establish new protected areas under the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and the implementation of a national Plan for the Prevention and and Combating of Deforestation in the Amazon from 2002. Consequently, more than 50% of the Brazilian Amazon is now under legally recognised protection and almost half of this area is reserved for indigenous peoples. This is positive news but has nothing to do with the ¨Save the Rainforest¨ campaign. It took almost 10 years from 2006 for deforestation rates in the Amazon basin to half once more. And now they are increasing rapidly once again.

What the New York Times also fails to note is that following the ¨Save the Rainforest¨ campaign and the soy moratorium, deforestation and land-use change subsequently increased dramatically elsewhere in South America, especially across the vast, tropical savanna regions of Chaco and Cerrado.

This is just one example of the liberal media establishment´s selective re-appropriation of facts which leads to the creation of a distorted reality that informs ¨progressive¨ consciousness. This practice has contributed significantly towards the ¨post-truth" world they claim to stand against.

The Ultimate Mystery Agenda

The NYT article is based on the publication of a new report, "The Ultimate Mystery Meat", which comes courtesy of a joint research project from Washington-based Mighty Earth and Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN). The featured time-lapsed images and data demonstrate the accelerating destruction of rainforests across South America, largely for the sake of growing Cargill and Bunge-traded GMO soybeans.

The return of intensive deforestation to the Brazilian Amazon (it never ended, it only slowed) demands radical action against the systemic causes. Yet the interests responsible for the gathering and publication of the new data are unwilling to acknowledge this. Rather, their agenda is set on promoting an unprecedented expansion of neoliberal ideology and control to the sphere of all natural resources; to redefine them as ¨natural capital¨.

Mighty Earth describes itself as a grassroots global campaign organisation that works to protect the environment through conservation efforts. They do this by securing commitments from corporations that they will ¨clean-up¨ their supply chain and ¨suspend¨ deforestation for commodity crops such as soy and palm oil.

The organisation is led by Henry Waxman. For 40 years he served in the US House of Representatives where he drafted a number of successful bills aimed, supposedly, at protecting human health and the environment. One of his more contested attempts is the 2009 American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES), which passed through the House of Representatives but never made its way to the Senate floor for discussion or a vote.

The bill essentially proposed a cap and trade system, similar to the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), which sets a limit on the total amount of greenhouse gases that can be emitted nationally. The limit is then progressively reduced over time. After the initial distribution of greenhouse gas emission allowances, regulated entities are then able to buy and sell carbon credits, creating a ¨carbon market.¨[2]

The failures and shortcomings of EU ETS are well-documented. What's important to note here is that Waxman´s ACES sought to allow emitters to offset a portion of their pollution by investing in activities that reduce deforestation, domestically and in ¨developing countries¨. What this essentially means is buying land outright or paying landowners or the government to conserve it. This is land typically populated by remote and indigenous communities. The professed logic of this is that by assigning capital values, in the form of rent-seeking, to natural resources such as forests, they become more valuable than when they are felled and as a result become better protected. This flawed counterfactual reasoning was well summarized 10 years ago by Dan Welch of Ethical Consumer: "Offsets are an imaginary commodity created by deducting what you hope happens from what you guess would have happened."

This is also the rationale of Mighty Earth's sister organization, Avoided Deforestation Partners (AD Partners). Both come under the auspices of the Centre for International Policy, a liberal think tank promoting US foreign policy interests overseas, particularly in South America. AD Partners supports initiatives that monetize forests' carbon storage capacity, or ¨carbon stock¨, thereby providing carbon credits that corporations can buy to offset their emissions. As a complement to Mighty Earth´s ¨grassroots¨ approach, AD Partners facilitates partnerships between leaders from commerce, politics and ¨civil society¨. They also engage prominent celebrities to spread their message and frame the issue to a wide audience through shows and documentaries such as ¨Years of Living Dangerously.¨[3]

English

Events

DeKweeper Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
June 10 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweeper Community Garden – Workshop #4 – Seedling Care & Summer Sowing
June 26 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
July 8 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Workshop #5 – Eco-Fertilizers & Chop n' Drop
July 31 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

DeKweepeer Community Garden – Solidarity Gardening Session
August 12 @ 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

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Projects

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Behoud Lutkemeer
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AD Partners is extremely active in the most far-reaching initiative utilizing this market-based approach to forest conservation; the UN's Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD), a multilateral body initiated in 2008. Indeed, UN-REDD is the only eligible avoided deforestation project type listed under Waxman´s ACES bill! Norway is the principal funder of UN-REDD, and RFN (who are also heavily funded by the Norwegian government) have played a significant role under REDD+, the branch of UN-REDD responsible for the design and implementation of the programme.

In theory, REDD+ provides incentives for the governments of densely-forested developing countries to protect or conserve the "carbon stock" of their forests. REDD+ has proven to be highly controversial for its colonial logic, impact on indigenous communities, equivocation of agro-plantations with primary forests, weak and unenforceable safeguards, and its top-down design by powerful international institutions. It is also criticized for its commitment to offset mechanisms rather than actual emission reductions making it a false solution to the climate crisis which allows corporations to continue as usual, promote their brand, and legitimize their inherently destructive, polluting practices through their participation.

Liberal Dystopia

But aside from questions and controversies over the framework and implementation of REDD+, and other market-based conservation initiatives, lies the fundamental assumption that "natural capital", the monetization of all natural resources and common goods (geology, air, water, soil, and all living organisms), can become the basis for a sustainable economy – ¨green capitalism¨. Measure it and then you can manage it- the essence of totalitarianism under the absolute control of the market.

Moreover, the concept of ¨natural capital¨ is nonsensical. Firstly, it is impossible to assign a quantitative value to the ¨free ecosystem services¨ nature provides. Nature is, in every sense of the word, priceless. But it is also nonsensical because capital in a capitalist economy, however ¨green¨ or ¨sustainable¨, is never invested for the sake of it; the aim is to extract more money or value than has been invested (if this doesn't happen, the system falls apart). And from where will this money or value be extracted when our entire commons has become commodified? For a concise explanation of the dangerous concept of natural capital and its inherently anti-ecological implications, read this article by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher.

So why persist with a model of rainforest protection that has evidently been failing for more than 10 years? Because of failing capital markets around the world; perennially sluggish, post-recession growth based on zero interest rates, rising debt, and quantitative easing. And because liberal philanthropic foundations, think-tanks, NGOs and their incomprehensible web of networks, alliances, and partnerships are all rooted in these same dead-end financial interests that have adopted the language and appearance of progressive values without any of the substance, nor the willingness to analyse systemic problems critically. Rather, the efforts of the neoliberal vanguard to privately appropriate the last remaining commons are obscured by mainstream environmental and conservation NGOs, allied with corporations and funded by Wall Street through liberal philanthropic foundations. Instead, the preferred strategy of ¨progressives¨ is to ¨shame¨ particular actors (Cargill, Burger King etc.) as causing the problem and promote others (UN-REDD, Mighty Earth, RFN etc.) as the solution to it.

All these organizations have much more in common, fundamentally, with one another than what distinguishes them; a fanatical attachment to an economic system intent on extracting value through the destruction of natural resources by any means necessary (not to mention their dependence on the exploitation of human labour and animals). As far as Mighty Earth is concerned, these means include the engineering of a safe form of ineffective outrage (conscious consumerism, distractivism, and mediagenic displays of protest), perfected by the NGO 350.org particularly in its Keystone XL pipeline campaign.

¨Grassroots activism¨ as defined by Mighty Earth: Not eating at Burger King= saving the rainforest.

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¨Grassroots activism as defined by Mighty Earth: White liberal patiently explains the bad behaviour of Burger King to African-American minimum wage employee.

From Post-Fact to Post-Bullshit

The duplicitous, confusing nature of these organisations is concealed by media institutes like the New York Times who dutifully repeat the findings and conclusions of conservation NGOs who are little more than fronts for Wall Street interests, their indirect principal funders. Simultaneously, the New York Times demonstrates its sympathy towards the PR teams of Cargill by choosing to focus on the ¨unfortunate¨ mythical tensions between human development (defined in terms of economic growth) and ecological health. They do this rather than examine the inherent conflict between the business model of these companies, determined by our economic system, and the health and well-being of natural resources such as the rainforests, and of those (primarily indigenous communities, but ultimately all of us) who depend on them.

In this supposed “post-fact” world decried by liberal media establishments, such as the New York Times, we need to recognise that though information, as contained in Mighty Earth and RFN´s report, is vital it becomes useless (even harmful) without critical, investigative analysis of the systemic drivers of endemic problems. Particularly necessary is critical analysis of the private and associated interests of those behind the research, however well-intentioned those on the ground doing the work may be. Don´t blindly follow the narrative and act like deforestation is due to Burger King behaving badly.

There is another way.[4] But the Center for International Policy, Mighty Earth, UN-REDD, Avoided Deforestation Partners, Rainforest Foundation Norway, the New York Times, and all their associated, inter-connected interests and subsidiaries dare not consider what this may be as it exists outside of capitalist orthodoxy and the neo-liberal Washington consensus which fervently believes that ceaselessly expanding commodification and rent-seeking through “free” markets across the planet is the answer to every conceivable problem. We need to smash this consensus. We need to assert the principle of common, collective ownership of land without centralized authority, not sacrifice whatever´s left to the very same processes which have brought us to this point. The creation of autonomous zones for rural and indigenous peoples in forests, savannahs, and other undeveloped lands, free from commercial exploitation, is the only viable approach.

The New York Times celebrates the failed “Save the Rainforest” campaign of 10 years ago and implicitly encourages its readers to support a renewed initiative led by similar actors to save it once more. But save it from who? Burger King? Cargill? Small-scale soy farmers? Indigenous communities? The rainforest does not need to be ¨saved¨, at least not from individual actors. The threat it faces is from the insatiable appetite of a faltering global economy reinventing (rebranding) itself as green capitalism for the purposes of monetizing and controlling for private gain what remains of the planet´s common goods.

We have already lost two-thirds of the world´s rainforests. More is lost each day. ¨Saving¨ the rainforest means dismantling capitalism. Anything less is rearranging the furniture in a burning house.

Don´t ¨Save the Rainforest.¨ Stop the Threat of Green Capitalism.

1 Another legacy of this campaign is the Roundtable on Responsible Soy- a business-led initiative with NGO approval which greenwashes intensive GMO soy production and has been a complete failure at eliminating deforestation. You can read more about this here.

2 Carbon Trade Watch have an archive of materials tracking the creation of the carbon market and its adverse impacts.

3 The series is produced by National Geographic, part of Rupert Murdoch´s media empire. The Advisory Board of the series is largely a collection of personalities from the revolving doors between mainstream conservation and environmental NGOs, investment and consultancy firms, and government administrations. Their green capitalist credentials are underlined to the point of parody by the show´s accompanying twitter hashtag- #putapriceonit.

4 Food sovereignty and agroecology are viable, urgent alternatives to industrial, globalized agriculture that fundamentally recognize the importance of biodiversity. The only attention this is given by the NYT is to criticize Morale´s government´s laudable but limited food sovereignty agenda as being responsible for increased deforestation in the country. For a more nuanced take on the tensions between state and indigenous interpretations of food sovereignty amidst the external pressures of neoliberalism read this article from the Transnational Institute.

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