



Extractivist onslaught and carbon markets in the forests: impacts and resistances

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The articles in this Bulletin are written by the following organizations and individuals:

Justiça Ambiental (JA!), Mozambique; Focus on the Global South, Cambodia; Acción Ecológica, Ecuador; Thai Climate Justice for All, Thailand; and members of the WRM International Secretariat.

OUR VIEWPOINT

Why is the defense of forests and their communities also a feminist struggle?

Feminist struggles place life at the center and show that in order to defend lands and forests, we must transform power relationships.

In the month of International Women's Day, this editorial reflects on an central issue for WRM: feminism within struggles for forests.

In light of this subject, we must ask ourselves: What do we mean by feminism? First of all, we must recognize that there is not just one, but rather many, feminist perspectives. And within this plurality, struggles that embrace common causes become woven together—especially in the Global South—as they seek to break from the systemic violence exerted on women's bodies and their territories.

Women experience extreme situations when they confront the oppressions of racism, imposed poverty and coloniality (1). In order to expand, capitalism requires the oppression of women, in particular that of black and indigenous women. It seeks to subjugate those who are essential pillars of community life, ancestral knowledge, caretaking work and the reproduction of life. Capitalism is patriarchal. And racism and coloniality, in turn, sustain capitalism, enabling it to deepen its oppression over territories.

Women and their communities are fighting to sustain and reproduce collective life. Capitalism, meanwhile—with its extractive projects and 'carbon offset' projects that uphold extractivism—destroys forests and the histories of forests; poisons; divides into concessions what before was seen as inseparable; and criminalizes and destroys the interconnected web of life. Capitalism also exploits bodies, especially those of women and girls—who, in addition to suffering from labor exploitation, also suffer from sexual harassment and violence. To this end, racist and patriarchal capitalism is also sustained by institutional violence: courts, police stations and health clinics that support the impunity of these crimes.

Women workers facing up to the PalmCi oil palm plantation company in Côte d'Ivoire said [in an interview](#), *"I can assure you that women are very useful [to the company]. Harvesting fruit all day long with no rest, day after day, for years. (...) The companies overexploit women in order to make a profit. That is what is happening."*

Meanwhile, Rassela Malinda shares stories from women in Papua, Indonesia, who are facing the imposition of industrial palm plantations. In [her article](#), she explains that these plantations *"are one of the most unsafe places for women, not only because of women's vulnerable employment status—mostly as casual laborers—but also because of the potential for sexual violence that lurks within and around the plantations."*

Likewise, women from Côte d'Ivoire [reported](#) that “women are victims of physical and other kinds of abuse. They are beaten and unjustly accused, as a pretext to demand favors from them. There is also sexual abuse, but this is kept quiet. They are told: ‘I saw you on our plantation stealing fruit. Take care of me and I’ll take care of you.’ What they mean is: ‘I’ll let you leave with the fruit if you have sex with me’ (...) Nobody has been punished for these crimes, despite the broken arms and traumatized girls and women. These crimes remain unpunished because the law of the jungle reigns.”

The oppressive patriarchal system is also apparent in governmental laws as well as customary laws—which often grant men most of the power over property and decisions regarding land. The same thing occurs when companies come to communities to try to get people to sign contracts: they almost always use strategies that reinforce male leadership, and they organize meetings with men only.

Flávia, an activist leader from a quilombola community in Sapê do Norte, Brazil [shares her experience](#) of the struggle to reclaim her community’s land and water sources: “Women have to be activists, mothers, homemakers. (...) We also suffer from prejudice for being black, quilombola, poor, farmers and women. Generally, the company underestimates us a lot. They think that ‘this woman isn’t capable of participating in a negotiation process,’ which means I constantly have to be asserting who I am” (2).

Meanwhile, Aminata Massaquoi, a member of the Informal Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa, told us [in an interview](#) about the situation of rural women with a customary marriage in Sierra Leone: “If the man dies, or if a woman wants to dissolve the marriage due to domestic violence, she might not have rights to the land that she has worked on for years. In this case, her husband’s family could expel her from the land. (...) If a woman is married, she dare not speak or make decisions in the presence of her husband. As a result, empowered women, or women who are aware of their rights, run the risk of suffering violence within their homes, due to insubordination.”

Consequently, feminist struggles are also carried out within the territories, communities and families themselves. On several occasions, women have expressed the importance of having their own space—just for women—where they can come together, organize and understand the different forms of violence that exist within community spaces.

Guadalupe Núñez Salazar, coordinator of The Network of Coastal Women in Rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, tells us [in an interview](#) about the importance of these spaces to be able to talk—not only about the impacts of palm in their territories, but also about the violence against their own bodies. She says, “Working in organizational processes of resistance in many cases also means confronting our own partners. Together we can see ways to move forward and keep fighting. Being able to hug one another and cry together helps us strengthen our collective voice.”

Feminist voices in territories are getting louder and louder. Feminist struggles place life at the center and show that in order to defend lands and forests, we must transform power relationships.

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- (1) The concept of power coloniality refers to the current perpetuation of colonial bases that sustained the formation of the capitalist order.
- (2) *Quilombola* communities are those formed by Afro-descendent people who were subjected to slavery and who escaped to found *quilombos* in Colonial and Imperial Brazil.

Rubber Tree Monoculture Plantations in Communal Territories in Mabu, Mozambique: Concession of Injustices

At the foot of Mount Mabu, Mozambique, the expansion of rubber tree monoculture plantations has restricted Manhaua communities' access to their own territory. This process has occurred by means of systematic abuses, thus depicting the contrast between the different ways the population and foreign capital relate to the environment where they find themselves.

At the foot of Mount Mabu, in central Mozambique, the expansion of rubber tree monoculture plantations by the company Mozambique Holdings has restricted Manhaua communities' access to their own territory. This process of expansion has occurred by means of systematic abuses, thus depicting the contrast between the different ways the local population and foreign capital relate to the environment where they find themselves.

The communities in Mabu (1)

Mabu is a locality of the Tacuane administrative outpost, in the Lugela district, Zambézia province, Mozambique. It has the same name as a local mountain, Mount Mabu, a place bearing spiritual importance for the surrounding communities. In recent years, the mount has become internationally known owing to the great biodiversity it harbors, since it is covered by the largest remaining tropical forest in southern Africa.

The population of Mabu is spread across the communities of Limbue, Namadoe, Nangaze and Nvava, and mostly belongs to the Manhaua people. According to the locality's administrative head, the population of the four villages numbers more than 10,000 people, but the figure is an overestimation, according to local leaders. Such communities are vividly connected to the territory where they live, and their living conditions to a large extent directly reflect their relation with the physical environment where they find themselves.

Practically every house is made of wattle and daub or adobe blocks, with grass roofs and earthen floors. The main source of energy is gathered firewood or locally produced charcoal. Practically all the water is obtained manually from streams, wells or the river. There is no electricity or internet distribution. Only a minority of households have small solar panels with the capacity to charge the batteries of small devices (mobile phones, radios, torches). Some families own bicycles and only small minority have motorbikes for personal transport and for goods.

Communities' basic foodstuffs come from agricultural production on *machambas* (small cultivated plots), whose area in general is under 1 hectare per household. Among the main crops one finds cassava, corn, beans, sweet potatoes, rice and peanuts, complemented by game, fish and wild fruits. The set of implements used is modest, normally limited to hoes, shovels and machetes,

while production does not rely on fertilizers or other inputs from outside. As far as possible, families carry out crop rotation, so that by remaining fallow the soil may recover part of its natural fertility. It is worth mentioning that the Mozambican NGO Justiça Ambiental (JA!) is working to support the families' organization into associations with a view to improving their land management and agricultural system.

Almost all local residents devote themselves to agriculture, working as families or individually. Given that most labor is employed in subsistence, there is a low level of trade and therefore a small flow of goods between the communities and the seat of the district in Lugela, which is more than 45km from the locality of Mabu in the small center of Limbue community – a challenge in itself. Only a very small part of what is produced constitutes a surplus that can be sold at market.

One aspect of life in Mabu similar to other communities, small or large, African or not, is the extra burden shouldered by women. As well as actively participating in the cultivation of the *machambas*, they are also in charge of all domestic work, which involves preparing food, caring for children and spending a long time fetching water and firewood, activities that they carry out with children, especially girls. However, the space occupied by women in communal decision-making spheres is practically nil. Similarly, girls are less likely to attend school, a fact reflected in their lower rates of literacy and knowledge of Portuguese, the country's official language. Another challenge mentioned during the discussions was the relatively high incidence of early marriages, of girls aged 12 to 14, for example.

But there is also another problem that has been directly impacting the lives of Mabu's communities, pointed out by the dwellers with whom WRM and JA! spoke. It is the scarcity of plots available for cultivation, hunting and gathering, and the consequent increase in the distances to the *machambas*, which implies more time and energy spent in transit. Among the factors that intensified this problem – as well as bringing new ones – is the arrival of Mozambique Holdings, a foreign company producing latex, and the resulting establishment of its rubber tree monoculture plantation.

Mozambique Holdings LTD: foreign capital with a Mozambican name

The Mozambique Holdings Ltd (MHL) group is an India-based conglomerate that set up in Mozambique in the early 1990s. It has become one of the country's largest private groups. (2) In 2020, its business dealings surpassed US\$100 million, with operations in Mozambique, India, USA, China and the United Arab Emirates. The group has activities in various sectors, with subsidiaries in the automotive, pharmaceutical, apparel, real estate, mining (coal and limestone), energy (concessions for hydroelectric power plants), water supply and irrigation industries, among others.

The group's tentacles reached the locality of Mabu in 2013, when it acquired a 10,000-hectare land concession from the old tea company Madal SARL. Since then, through its subsidiary Agro-Industrial e Chá de Tacuane LDA, the group has been implementing a rubber production pilot

project, having replaced the old tea-growing areas and cleared new ones to make way for rubber tree monoculture. Latex extraction actually began in 2021. Its main destination is nowhere to be found on the company's website. One possibility is supplying rubber for the automotive industry, particularly for the Indian vehicle manufacturer Mahindra, of which MHL is the distributor in Mozambique.

Access to land, violence and fear

The arrival of the corporation strongly impacted the territory and the lives of Mabu's residents. Problems of several kinds have gone hand in hand with the expansion of rubber tree plantation.

The first has to do with respect for the land. Back in colonial times, a large land concession in Mabu had been granted to foreign capital in the form of the old company Madal, in a process that certainly disregarded any opinion of the local population. However, profound crises rocked the country during the civil war (1977-1992) and several business ventures were abandoned. Since then, government plans to reactivate tea and cotton production in Mabu for the international market have not taken hold. Abandoned by these business initiatives, part of the lands under concession started being used by the surrounding communities to produce for self-consumption and to reside. This was entirely legitimate, since the control of these lands should never have left the hands of the local population, if one agrees with traditional peoples' right to self-determination.

With the arrival of Mozambique Holdings in Mabu, once again the area of the old concession went over to the control of foreign capital despite the occupation and use of at least part of the lands by local communities. The local population is no longer permitted to use the lands located inside the concession. As if the sudden loss of access were not enough, the company has been employing truculent and abusive methods. According to local leaders heard by WRM and JA! (and already partly documented) (3), there are reports of: confiscation of hoes; persecution; destruction of *machambas*; burning of corn barns; expulsion from areas already prepared for cultivation; burning of leftover wood for the local population not to use it as firewood, among others. In one of the cases, a member of the Nvava community was beaten supposedly by Indian foremen linked to the company for using an internal path to return from a funeral in Namadoe community. (4)

Note that one is dealing here not only with preventing people from farming the land, but even from passing through the area granted to the company. For example, it was reported that a family – husband and wife plus a 16-year-old daughter – was followed and slapped in the face to prevent them from transiting! As if that were not enough, the security guards ripped the woman's and the girl's top, leaving them bare breasted, once again evincing the consequences of the structurally different oppression suffered by women.

In the case of Limbue community, blocking people's passage is particularly serious, considering that the only road to access the community goes through the plantation. By restricting or constraining the free transit of members of the community, the company increases the isolation of

the community vis-à-vis the rest of the district. All this goes on under a shroud of fear, threats and a common perception among the members of the community that they do not have rights or recourse in the face of the abuses in question.

It even sounds like irony, but far away from Mabu, in another language the (Indian) owner of Mozambique Holdings exalts the “Mozambican ethos and cultural psyche”, saying that out of *gratitude* to the country, his company *gives back* and *evolves* “in harmony with this ethnic and cultural diversity”. (5)

It is also worth highlighting the fact that so far the company states it has planted just 1,000 hectares with rubber trees and has not yet reached the target of its pilot project, which is disturbing, since the plantation has already reached the entrance to the seat of the locality.

Lack of transparency and environmental irregularities

The coercion and the restrictions regarding access to land imposed on local dwellers lead one to another question: the lack of transparency in relation to the land use concession to the corporation. Despite requests made by Justiça Ambiental to the Ministry of Land and Environment, the information about this process and the community consultation process has not been made available, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the concession. (6)

The same applies to information regarding the venture’s environmental conformity. When visiting the locality, one notices that the expansion of the plantation has taken place in the wake of the felling of the native vegetation. Furthermore, in many places the fields are planted right up to the edge of water courses, with no riparian forest remaining. Also, the absence of any kind of environmental impact assessment – a legal requirement in Mozambique – begs the question: *how* or even *whether* Mozambique Holdings obtained the environmental license to establish its monoculture plantations in Mabu.

Illusory expectations, sub-employment and precarious work

Another problematic dimension of the venture relates to labor relations. Residents report that the situation is a far cry from the expectations generated at the time when the transfer of the concession to Mozambique Holdings was announced, both in terms of the number of jobs and of their quality.

Anselmo Matusse, who investigated the company’s working conditions, paints a picture of abuse, involving 12-hour work days and unattainable daily tasks/targets, resulting in pay checks at the end of the month nowhere near the minimum wage. (7) He also reported that the company did not supply tools, as well as making workers compulsorily buy shoes and meat from it in order to dock the amount they cost from their pay.

Contrasts and contradictions

What one sees in Mabu is a contrast that reveals the power asymmetry between Mozambique Holdings and the communities, and the completely different logics of relating to the land. To Mozambique Holdings the land is a mere substrate for a plantation with one million rubber trees – many of which replaced the local biodiversity – treated with synthetic fertilizers and agro-chemicals brought from far away using fossil fuels to produce a commodity that will be exported, and resulting in profits that will go to foreigners who probably will never set foot there. Based on the facts, little does it matter for Mozambique Holdings if its business forces local dwellers to seek other places to pursue their subsistence activities under more precarious conditions.

For the Manhaua communities, the land is the source of practically all their food, water, shelter (houses) and energy (firewood), obtained through an autonomous management system for many generations. Beyond literally ensuring the communities' physical existence, the land is also a place where their beliefs, customs and knowledge are perpetuated, transmitted and shared in their own language from generation to generation.

This article does not aim to romanticize the way of life of the communities of Limbue, Namadoe, Nvava and Nangaze, but rather to emphasize the impacts of industrial plantations on their territories. The arrival of Mozambique Holdings in Mabu is yet another example, among so many others, of how corporations that need land for their tree monoculture plantations simply ride roughshod over communities no matter how long they have been on their territory. Question: what has been the benefit for the dwellers of Mabu? Who decided to grant part of those lands as a concession without any consultation or participation of the communities?

From the communities' point of view, the logic of prioritizing a company by restricting the population's access to the land is absurd in and of itself. Additionally, Mozambique Holdings makes the situation even worse due to the abovementioned abuses and violent methods. If the objective of the concession in Mabu were to bring economic and social benefits for Mozambicans – and not to generate profits for a private company – then encouraging communities' ongoing initiatives to improve living conditions would make much more sense. What is inconceivable is that communities such as those in Mabu be forced to accept that the fate of their lands – and, therefore, theirs too – gets determined by outsiders.

Justiça Ambiental (JA!), Mozambique, and the World Rainforest Movement (WRM)

(1) The information presented in this section was obtained by means of a visit paid by WRM and JA! in October 2022 during which many conversations with dwellers of Mabu were had. These were confirmed by the data of the latest census and of the most recent official information bulletin of the Lugela district to which it was possible to obtain access:

<https://www.portaldogoverno.gov.mz/por/content/download/2903/23567/version/1/file/Lugela.pdf>

(2) Mozambique Holdings, O nosso legado, <https://mhl.co.mz/about-us-pt/>; Mozambique Holdings, Visão partilhada, ambição unificada, <https://mhl.co.mz/portfolio-pt/>.

(3) Justiça Ambiental, 2021, <https://justica-ambiental.org/2021/09/27/camponeses-denunciam-a-empresa-mozambique-holdings-lda-as-autoridades-policiais-em-lugela/>

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- (4) Justiça Ambiental, 2020, <https://justica-ambiental.org/2020/04/29/violacao-de-direitos-humanos-pela-empresa-mozambique-holdings-lda-em-lugela/>
- (5) *The Business Year*, interview with José Parayanken, <https://www.thebusinessyear.com/interview/jose-parayanken-president-mozambique-holdings-limited-mhl/>
- (6) Justiça Ambiental, 2021, <https://justica-ambiental.org/2021/07/23/mozambique-holdings-afinal-quem-sao-e-quem-os-protege/>
- (7) Anselmo Matusse, published in *Verdade Online*, https://verdade78.rssing.com/chan-5895196/all_p417.html

Cambodia. Rubber Plantations, Protected Areas, REDD+ and Other Threats: A Dramatic Loss for Forest Dwellers

Forests in Cambodia have seen large-scale deforestation with rubber and cassava plantations, illegal logging and other economic interests. Besides, Protected Areas and carbon projects like REDD+ have severely affected forest communities. Despite the criminalization, communities fight back, underlining the important connection between living with their forests and having autonomy to enough, diverse and nutritious food.

Twenty-five years ago, more than 80 percent of Cambodians relied on their land and forests for their sustenance. They were engaged in farming, fishing and animal husbandry or depended on non-timber forest products to survive. Forests gave life and provided diverse sources of income to most forest communities, who knew very well how to preserve them. For an outsider, ordinary life in the forests of Cambodia would have been considered 'poor', but forest communities saw it differently. For them, life could still exist without so many troubles. People were not falling into terrible debts, they had enough food and they did not need to migrate to work in other countries.

But over the past 12 years, many forest areas in Cambodia have been cleared and turned into economic land concessions (ELCs), including rubber and cassava plantations, as well as other private uses, under the argument of 'boosting' the economy. Alongside this is the massive degradation of forests from illegal logging driven by the insatiable demand of luxury timber. Protected Areas and carbon offset programs, especially REDD+ projects, have also severely affected forests and forest dependent communities. A question asked by communities is, after all these years, who has benefited from this so-called 'boost' of the Cambodian economy?

The dramatic loss of forests is a heavy burden for forest-dependent peoples, seriously impacting their livelihoods, local economies, social fabric and cultures, as well as adversely affecting local food systems. A forest dweller from the Bamnak village in the Krakor district, Pursat province, said during a conversation in late 2021: "When the forest was still there, our families were living peacefully, we farmed and there were plenty of vegetables to eat. The women could look after the children, feed the chickens, ducks and pigs, while the men went out to the forests to harvest products for making some money to support the families. Now that the forest is gone, we do not know what to do." (1)

Since 2002, the country's legislation allows community forests to be demarcated for collective use. The Law establishes that communities can request the forest authorities for a community forest to be recognized and, according to a 2003 sub-decree, the area can be managed by a Community Forestry Committee, which should be established voluntarily by the community.

However, most of these Committees, and thus the community forests, remain susceptible to the threat of ELCs, criminalization and other outside influences. Many requests for community forests' recognition have been denied or ignored. Currently, there are even legal restrictions on the demands that established Forest Committees can make, including the prohibition of mobilizing people to protest and other public actions while submitting evidence of forest destruction to the Ministry of Forestry. The police and the provincial courts intimidate community members when they protest or try to stop possible land grabbing activities.

Lorang Yun, head of the Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance (CIPA), said during an interview to news portal Mongabay in 2022: "Since 2005, fewer than 40 communities have acquired a communal land title, despite hundreds applying." He explained that Indigenous Peoples face problems in the courts in part due to the rampant levels of corruption around land ownership and economic concessions in the country. He also explained how conservation NGOs also intensify conflicts, since they establish Protected Areas even as communal land titling processes are ongoing. (2)

A member of the Andong Bor Community Forest Committee at Oddar Meanchey province explained: "We don't have the right to protest or the right to file a complaint. Only they [the forestry administration authorities] have the power to do something. We are not trying to protect the forest just for our own benefit, it is for everyone."

Rubber plantations

Large-scale monoculture plantations, in particular rubber, have been at the forefront of deforestation in Cambodia, especially in the last two decades. Global Forest Watch exposed how nearly five percent of the land area in Cambodia is reserved for rubber plantations. (3) In addition, industrial monoculture production of oil palm, cassava, sugarcane, corn and jatropha have also expanded under economic land concessions (ELCs).

In May 2012, the government suspended the granting of ELCs in the midst of growing criticism and an inter-ministerial committee was formed to review existing concessions. Consequently, more than 100 concessions have been revoked from concessionaires that did not abide by the law or the concession's lease.

Nonetheless, fueled by international consumer demand, rubber plantations have recently experienced a surge in expansion. A study showed how the annual forest-to-rubber conversion rates closely correlate with global rubber prices. (4) As of December 2021, 946,926 hectares had been allocated for rubber plantations, spread across 157 economic land concessions. (5)

Protected Areas

As Cambodia emerged from years of conflict, a number of Protected Areas were created by a royal decree in 1993. More detailed guidelines came in the 2008 Protected Areas Law. About 26 percent of land in Cambodia is designated as a Protected Area.

However, most of these Areas have seen large-scale deforestation. The Snuol Wildlife Sanctuary, for example, experienced wholesale clearance for rubber and cashew plantations, as well as illegal logging, so much that its protected status was removed in 2018, on the basis of there being almost nothing left to protect.

On top of this, it is crucial to highlight that the establishment of the country's Protected Areas has resulted in thousands of forest dependent populations lose their homes as the government and conservation NGOs took control of land that had housed many communities for generations.

Such conservation programmes continue to be a threat to forest communities as the government of Cambodia has joined the 'High Ambition Coalition', an intergovernmental group that has the main goal of 'protecting' at least 30 percent of the world's lands and oceans by 2030.

Moreover, the country's government outlined in October 2022 its commitment to reach 'carbon neutrality' by 2050 through forest conservation, mainly by implementing and scaling up REDD+ projects. (6)

The REDD+ Disaster

Community elder Srey Khongphoen, from the Andong Bor Community, Oddar Meanchey province, remembered during a conversation in 2020: "When the forest still existed 10-15 years ago, it was easy to find food, such as the Prich leaves. There was a lot of Prich inside this forest. During March, April and May, old leaves would fall down and new leaves would come, so people could go into the forest to pick them up, cook them and sell them. Everyday during that season, a family could collect around 5 to 6 kilos. And the price was around 12,000 to 20,000 riel [around US3 to 5 dollars] per kilo. Prich leaves gave a decent source of income to forest peoples." Srey has 7 children and she used to earn around 40,000 to 60,000 riel (around US10 to 15 dollars) per day by picking up Prich leaves.

This situation changed dramatically in the Andong Bor community forest area with the introduction of a REDD+ project. REDD+ stands for 'Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation.' The Cambodian government launched a pilot REDD+ project in the Oddar Meanchey community forests in May 2008, covering almost 64 thousand hectares of what used to be forests.

The Community Forest Committees at Oddar Meanchey Province were established in 2005 by joining 678 families from 5 villages: Kantul Choun, Samrong Tahea, Voryiev, Damkor Tapok and Kralor Senchay, located at the Beng commune, Banteay Ampil District.

This REDD+ Project -whose objective was to sell carbon credits of an alleged 8.2 million tons of emission reductions over 30 years,- claimed to work "with local communities to establish

Community Forest groups that implement project activities to reduce deforestation, improve livelihoods and protect biodiversity.” (7)

Community Committees involved in the Oddar Meanchey REDD+ project received a training course related to the carbon project led by Children Development Association (CDA), the forestry administration and other local and international NGOs, including TerraGlobal, which had a partnership with WCS and Care. The trainers told them that by taking good care of the forest, they would be able to benefit and the Committees would get some money from the selling of carbon credits by 2020. But if they couldn't protect the forest, then they would not get any money either. After the training, Committees were responsible for disseminating the information about the REDD+ project to the people in the different villages.

During the first years of the project, Committees were able to patrol the forests to protect them from illegal logging. But the project was filled with conflicts and problems from the beginning. As research from 2016 showed, some villagers were forced to pay bribes to Community Forest Committees or soldiers, just to be able to go into the forests to collect non-timber forest products or small amounts of timber. (8) In 2012, military regiments entered to establish a military base inside the Andong Bor community forest and started growing cassava plantations. Each year, the plantations expanded and the military would sell cassava to the elites in the Banteay Meanchey province.

In response, the Community Committees conducted many actions to bring the destruction of the forests to the authorities: they filed legal complaints, submitted petitions backed by photographs and other evidence collected from the local areas, carried out investigation reports for the relevant authorities, and also mobilized protests by village communities. But none of these achieved positive results because the district and provincial governors themselves supported the military instead of the Community Forest Committees. The military also sold two areas in the mountains of these forests to a Chinese rock grinding company. A member of the Community Forest Committee in Oddar Meanchey reflected during a meeting in 2020: “Maybe selling land is getting them richer faster than selling carbon. That's why they have cut all the forest and sell it out to the rich people; in order to get more money quickly.”

The REDD+ project failed to stop the deforestation process in Oddar Meanchey. According to a political map made by the Community Forest Committees themselves, most of the forest areas were sold to rich people for growing mainly cassava plantations. There are also two gasoline stations, one cassava warehouse and other residential land for economic activities. Besides, the military distributed some part of the land for houses. There are around 100 military houses built along the road with a plot of land each for growing cassava and banana trees. There is just a small area that still remains with some forest. But, as a member of the Community Committee said: “No one can stop them. Even if we get our community forests back, we would get back just empty land. We would need a very long time to get the forests to come back again while protecting what is left.”

Another member of the Community Forest Committee said during a conversation in 2020: “People want their forests back. The forests are very important, they attract the rainfall, they provide with firewood for people to cook... but nowadays, after so many years without it, some people buy two bags of charcoal per month for cooking. Nonetheless, the majority still believes that we were not aware of how rich we were with the forests we had, with wild animals for cooking, and with Prich leaves to earn extra income. People did not have to worry for food to eat; some just went to pick up fruits, dig crabs, snails, catch fish, frogs, or wild-animals at night. Today, however, around 80 - 90 percent of the children or young people no longer go to school. They have to accompany their parents to work in Thailand in order to ease the family burden. So many, if not all, have to leave the village to earn money.”

“The loss of this forest has a lot of impact. If we could have our forest as before, people could build their houses without problems. Now, when our children get married and separate from the parents’ house, there is no money to buy wood to build a new house. If we could have our forest as before, we could find non-timber forest products... some people could earn from 100,000 to 150,000 riels [around US 25 to 37.5 dollars] per family. And our community forest was not only useful for our villages here, but for around 20 other villages, some from the other side of the forest. If we could have our forest as before, we would not need to use chemical fertilizers to grow our rice. Now, rice is the worst. The truth is that people do not have much hope of getting back the forestland that was grabbed from us.”

Forests are a Source of Life

Despite the serious intimidation, harassment and even imprisonment, some forest dwellers keep fighting back to preserve their forests and life. In the Pursat province near the Aoral Mountain, a community member stated during a conversation in 2020, referring to the loss of their forests due to large-scale cassava plantations: “In the past, people could live together, had time to eat together, and when there was a ceremony or a house warming celebration, people was helping each other with cutting bamboo, chopping firewood, sawing wood and, most importantly, people were not upset as today. Nowadays, everything has to count as money... We need to be united as Community Forest Committees in protecting and enforcing our rights. We need to get our food systems and local economies back. We must also work together to protect the remaining forests and regenerating the rest.”

For their part, several community members from Oddar Meanchey and the Pursat provinces explained the importance of people in the villages going back to grow their own crops. They clarified that for this to happen, communities must create and protect large ponds of water for collective use and small ponds for families’ use, so that crops can be irrigated daily. “Water is as important as forests and land,” explained an elder from a community in Oddar Meanchey. Their wisdom remains enormous and they are very clear the importance of a healthy forest, where livelihoods not only come from crops, but also from catching crabs, fish, frogs, snails, mice or other small wild-animals, as well as from collecting non-forest timber products, such as leaves and mushrooms.

Forest communities underline the important connection between protecting and living with their forests and their food sovereignty, meaning their power and autonomy to have enough, diverse and nutritious food. “There will be a lot of things to eat if we go back to have our forests, and the living conditions of forest peoples may not be as difficult as today,” explained a community member from the Oddar Meanchey province.

Sun Ridan

Focus on the Global South, Cambodia

(1) All testimonies in this article, unless referenced otherwise, are from field visits of Focus on the Global South, carried out during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Names that are left anonymous are for security reasons.

(2) Mongabay, No justice for Indigenous community taking on a Cambodian rubber baron, December 2022, <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/12/no-justice-for-indigenous-community-taking-on-a-cambodian-rubber-baron/>

(3) Global Forest Watch, What’s Happening in Cambodia’s Forests?, 2019, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/blog/data-and-research/whats-happening-in-cambodias-forests/>

(4) Unravelling the link between global rubber price and tropical deforestation in Cambodia, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41477-018-0325-4>

(5) Cambodia’s concessions, https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land_concessions/

(6) Everland, Cambodian Government to Scale Forest Conservation While Ensuring Economic Growth and Prosperity Through REDD+, 2022, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/cambodian-government-to-scale-forest-conservation-while-ensuring-economic-growth-and-prosperity-through-redd-301648186.html>

(7) Terra Global Capital, Oddar Meanchey Community REDD+ Project, Cambodia, <https://www.terraglobalcapital.com/oddar-meanchey-community-redd-project-cambodia>

(8) REDD-Monitor, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia: “No one seems to be learning any lessons”, 2016, https://reddmonitor.substack.com/p/oddar-meanchey-cambodia-no-one-seems?utm_source=substack&utm_campaign=post_embed&utm_medium=web

‘Environmental services’ in the Ecuadorian Constitution: A way to strengthen the monopolization of territories?

A recent Popular Consultation in Ecuador attempted to include, among other things, ‘environmental services offsets’ as a constitutional right. The majority of voters voted against it. However, this attempt serves as a warning about the interests that wish to strengthen policies of appropriation and the commodification of nature.

In February 2023, the government of Guillermo Lasso called a Popular Consultation in Ecuador with the intention of making amendments to the Constitution. Among the proposed changes, there was an issue that would modify Article 74 of the Constitution to give *offsets for environmental services* constitutional rank.

In this context, it is important to point out that putting the label of *environmental services* on the functions and cycles of nature—such as water filtration in forests and soils, the carbon cycle, biodiversity, and pollination by bees, etc—was born from the logic of the capitalist economy. The role of environmental ‘services’ provider was imposed on nature, under the fallacy that giving nature an economic value would help save it. Putting a price on the functions and cycles of nature was well received by UN agencies, the World Bank, polluting companies and industries, conservation NGOs, and financiers—among others—who sought, and continue to seek, new ways to accumulate wealth and profit.

When talking about *offsets*, we refer to a system whereby certificates issued from a certain area (also called ‘offset credits’) supposedly guarantee that the ‘service’ located in that area is being protected. But what is really being protected is a commodity—which in this case is the offset certificate itself. Nature is turned into disconnected, fragmented, predictable, measurable and comparable units of ‘environmental services.’

The most common offsets are those for carbon dioxide emissions, but there are also offsets for loss of biodiversity and water sources. Certificates allow those who buy them to pollute or destroy in an amount ‘equivalent’ to what is established in the certificate. In the case of carbon, for example, each certificate allows the polluter to emit a ton of carbon dioxide while also allowing the polluter to obtain a ‘green’ image or advertise that they are ‘carbon neutral.’

The constitutional amendment on environmental services that the Popular Consultation in Ecuador sought to enact will not be implemented—because the majority of people voted NO. However, this governmental attempt is a warning about the interests of companies and the pressure they exert to strengthen policies of appropriation and commodification of nature. The case of Ecuador is emblematic, seeing as Ecuador’s Constitution serves as a global example for the recognition of the rights of Nature.

The Montecristi Constitution and attempted changes to it

The 2008 Constitution (called the Montecristi Constitution) was the result of a comprehensive process led by historic and diverse struggles in Ecuador. Among other things, this Constitution (at least on paper) strengthened the capacity of the state, aligned the economy with national and social criteria, created a tax system to redistribute wealth, and dedicated a section to “*Buen Vivir*’ (Living Well) as an alternative paradigm and a guide for the country’s public policies. It is important to mention that the concept of ‘*Buen Vivir*’ does not come from the Montecristi Constitution, but from ancient traditions and wisdom rooted in Andean peoples. In this vein, the Constitution also refers to the State as Plurinational.

But perhaps the greatest advancement, unique and historic in the world, is the recognition of Nature as a subject of rights (Art 71-74). Some of these rights include the right to be defended, and the prohibition on the appropriation of environmental services. As an example of the radical force of this inclusion, the Constitution’s Preamble begins in the following way: “Celebrating nature, Pachamama, of which we are part and which is a vital part of our existence (...)” This places the intrinsic relationship between humans and non-humans at the centre of the analysis.

Article 74—which the Popular Consultation attempted to modify—stipulates that: “ (...) environmental services will not be subject to appropriation; their production, provision, use and exploitation will be regulated by the State.”

The issue in the Popular Consultation asked voters: “*Do you agree that individuals, communities, peoples and nationalities can be beneficiaries of offsets, that are duly regulated by the State, and which support the generation of environmental services, amending the Constitution in accordance with Annex 8?*” (1) Had the ‘yes’ vote won in the Consultation, this would have granted the State the authority to define “the guidelines and offset mechanisms that individuals, communities, peoples and nationalities receive for their help in generating said offsets.”

The interests behind the Popular Consultation

To understand the implications of this Consultation in Ecuador, WRM spoke with **Ivonne Yáñez, founding member of the Ecuadorian organization, Acción Ecológica, and activist, feminist and researcher. Yvonne is also a member of WRM’s Advisory Council.**

WRM: The Constitution already includes the idea of ‘environmental services’—albeit in a spirit of protecting those ‘services’ and preventing their appropriation. Could you explain to us, then: What is the specific objective of the constitutional amendment sought through the Popular Consultation?

Ivonne: At Acción Ecológica we are against the very idea of environmental services, since we know that they are a capitalist invention. The first environmental services were created in the United States in the 1970s to avoid compliance with growing environmental regulations.

Nevertheless, Article 74 of the Ecuadorian Constitution at least clearly prohibits their appropriation. The change that was proposed in the Popular Consultation—to include offsets as a constitutional right—could have easily opened up the appropriation of environmental services to companies or private investors. We know that there can be no offsets without a set of rules mediating those who offer, buy and sell them.

On the other hand, the government's interest in the amendment was to position Ecuador as a provider of environmental services and to demonstrate to carbon traders that there could be a free market for offsets in the country—which would give free rein to all kinds of businesses. This includes digital assets, *tokens* or values that may be related to the carbon market and environmental services. *Digital carbon* projects use territories, forests, rivers, biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples' cultures to make shady and highly risky deals (2).

WRM: Aren't Payments for Environmental Services already allowed in Ecuador through programs such as Sociobosque, and through the introduction of carbon projects? If this is the case, why was there an attempt to reform the Constitution?

Indeed, Payments for Environmental Services already exist in Ecuador—for example, through the Organic Environmental Code and its regulations, the Sociobosque and ProAmazonia programs (which include REDD+), and the Ecuador Carbon Zero Program (3).

All of these public policies already incorporate the *incentive* to offer environmental services as well as an economic acknowledgement or green image for the companies. From this perspective, the [ballot] issue was unnecessary. However, we were able to see how companies that trade in carbon offsets exerted a lot of pressure over the last few months to get Article 74 changed—because they see it as a roadblock keeping them from making all of the deals they want to make.

It is clear that the [ballot] issue on environmental services was an attempt, on the one hand, to elevate the popularity of the government (which is in the dumps), and on the other hand, to help voluntary carbon offset markets gain traction in the country—through subsequent environmental reforms that would de facto allow the appropriation of environmental services. Even though we don't defend the idea of environmental services—which are becoming a strategic State-owned resource—we should at least preserve the article in the Constitution that keeps them from going viral in Ecuador.

WRM: What would the implications be if offsets for environmental services were approved, taking into account the process and agreements that led to the 2008 Constitution?

'No' won on issue 8 of the Popular Consultation, which was the issue related to environmental services. In some provinces it won with up to 80 percent of the vote. However, we must analyse this a little more closely. Indigenous Amazonian organizations actually opposed this issue because they advocate that environmental services in their territories should be the property of

World Rainforest Movement

Indigenous Peoples, and that without State intervention they can directly negotiate Payments for Environmental Services with whomever they want.

Since the issue also included the detail that the State would be the *administrator*, for indigenous Amazonian organizations this meant more centralized control over environmental services— which could therefore affect the deals they could make autonomously without having to register everything with the State.

Finally, the fact that ‘No’ has won does not mean that the government will not want to make all the secondary regulatory changes to strengthen the idea of environmental services and, by extension, their trade in Ecuador. We will continue to be vigilant and denounce what these mean for people and for the planet.

(1) See the issues and provisions of the Popular Consultation, including annex 8, here:

<https://www.cne.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/RESOLUCION-PLE-CNE-1-6-12-2022.pdf>

(2) Acción Ecológica, Amenazas del Capitalismo Digital: el caso de One Amazon, <https://www.accionecologica.org/observaciones-al-convenio-de-asociacion-entre-one-amazon-y-la-ficsh/>

(3) The SocioBosque and ProAmazonia programs in Ecuador seek to be a part of REDD+ plans (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). This allows carbon in People's forests to be traded in markets for carbon and other environmental services. See more in Ecological Action, "De Pacha Mama Sagrada A Mercancía Privada" <https://www.accionecologica.org/de-pacha-mama-sagrada-a-mercancia-privada/> and WRM, "15 Years of REDD: A Mechanism Rotten at the Core" <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/15-years-of-redd/>; The "Ecuador Zero Carbon Program" (PECC) is a market-based environmental program that establishes the sale of 'carbon reduction' certificates under a pay-to-pollute principle. For this program, a portfolio of offsets will be created, as well as the 'Punto Verde' brand. See more at Acción Ecológica, "Ecuador Carbono Cero = ¿Permisos para contaminar?", <https://www.accionecologica.org/ecuador-carbono-cero-permisos-para-contaminar/>

Thailand: Valuing Forests as Carbon Credits

[Available also in Thai](#)

Indigenous Peoples and communities in the forests of Thailand are threatened with policies that have added a new type of asset: carbon credits. The legislation passed in the name of conservation and climate mitigation is in fact designed to limit the use of forest communities of their land and forests while encroaching them into smaller areas.

Forest areas in Thailand contain the rich diversity of tropical rainforests, including the relationships and interconnections with the Indigenous Peoples and local communities that coexist with these forests. Rooting on their own principles of traditional knowledge and practices, these communities have preserved their forests for generations, making these areas one of the most biodiverse in the world. In addition, they practice different ways of community-based ‘management’ of their land, forests and local economies. However, community systems are threatened due to problematic policies that pretend to turn all forests into state and private property, adding now a new type of asset: carbon credits.

Thai Forest Conservation Policies

Forest conservation policy in Thailand began in 1896 when the Royal Forest Department (RFD) was founded to administer forest concessions, followed by the Forest Act B.E. 2484 (or 1941) and the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) in 1974. These policies transformed the country’s forested areas into state assets for timber exports, criminalizing around 10 million people from forest-dependent communities who inhabited the forests long before these laws and policies appeared.

After widespread protests by forest communities across Thailand against timber extraction and the industry’s many impacts, the forest economic concessions’ management plan was changed in 1989, establishing a ban on logging. Instead, forest areas were declared National Reserve Forests to be solely managed by the Department of National Parks (DNP). The DNP still has the authority to approve any public or private project in these Reserve Forests while also controlling the livelihoods of more than 4 thousand forest communities that depend on forests.

The logging ban marked the emergence of an increasingly militarized approach to forest conservation, and the Royal Forestry Department adopted a hard line stance against those who lived inside protected areas, particularly against upland Indigenous communities in the north lacking Thai citizenship. Forests were seen as spaces where no agriculture was supposed to be practiced. All types of swidden agricultural systems were lumped together, stigmatized as irrational and destructive.

Besides, the relatively poor enforcement of the legislation and the confusion over land tenure claims in the Reserve Forests brought new layers of complexity. For instance, there were

corruption scandals over tourism activities and the exploitation of resources in the Reserve Forests.

The attempt to categorize forests was clear in Thailand's National Forest Policy Directives of 1985 and of 2019 (1), as they aim to have *40 percent of the country with forest areas*. This aim was to be divided into 25 percent of state-controlled 'Reserve Forests' (national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, watershed areas); and 15 percent of 'economic forests' (forests reserved for multi-purposes), which include community forests and plantations by private actors on state-owned land. As of March 2023, according to the government, it has achieved 31.59 percent of this goal.

Community forests vary regionally. In general, they seek to maintain the ecological systems, ensure food sovereignty, preserve traditional medicines, support the local economies, and promote the spiritual well-being of the community. Therefore, every recognized forest community has the right to manage its own forests. But when the government issued the Community Forest Act in 2019, such laws and regulations severely limited communities' rights within Reserve Forest areas. The Department of Forestry is the only authorized body to determine and classify forests, meaning that only those registered under its office can be considered as community forests.

On the other side, the purpose of 'economic forests', which was initially for exploiting timber (aka. plantations), shifted to also allow private companies to use the areas for ecotourism and corporate social responsibility activities (CSR).

However, the pressure over the climate crisis and the international negotiations has transformed the status, economic value and use of forests (and tree plantations) to add a new type of asset: Carbon credits.

The Carbon in the Forests

International climate negotiations have transformed forests into 'carbon sinks' which are meant to generate 'carbon credits' to be traded in international free markets. These 'carbon sinks' are referred to as offset projects, because the credits from these projects are supposed to compensate for the pollution of others. Credits can therefore be bought by governments, companies or individuals that want to offset an 'equal' amount of carbon emissions or claim carbon 'neutrality'. (2) These 'carbon sink' projects can also be industrial monoculture plantations, as the importance is placed only on the capacity of trees to absorb carbon dioxide in order to generate the tradable credits. This logic of offsetting and of turning forests into 'carbon sinks' benefits the largest carbon-emitting industries, in particular the energy and agribusiness sectors, by enabling them to expand and operate under the guise of being 'carbon neutral'.

Companies invest in low-cost large-scale reforestation projects (mainly of monoculture tree plantations) to be used as carbon offsets. They can also buy carbon credits from projects in Protected Areas that are claiming to be 'storing' and 'conserving' the carbon.

Consequently, the Thai government's target to increase the number of tree-covered areas in the country as well as the private sector reforestation projects should not be regarded as benevolent initiatives, usually under CSR activities, but rather as a hidden agenda to profit from the carbon credits.

In 2007, Thailand began to integrate the concept of the carbon market into national policy. The Thailand Greenhouse Gas Management Organization (TGO) was established to implement mechanisms for the carbon market and administer the Thailand Voluntary Emission Reduction Program (TVER). Additionally, Thailand participates in the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) program with support from the World Bank and the Royal Forest Department. All these policies and programs cause concerns among civil society organizations and forest community groups as they threaten to limit the rights of communities' in the use, access and management of their forests. Still, the REDD+ program continues to be pushed forward despite these concerns.

The role of carbon markets is expected to increase rapidly in the country. The government has launched its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the United Nations, with targets to increase its forest-based 'carbon capture capacity'. Forests and industrial tree plantations have become a key essential aspect for the government to be able to claim 'carbon neutrality' by 2050 and 'net zero' by 2065.

In this context and with these targets in mind, the Thai government launched a 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2018-2037) that aims to increase the tree cover areas to 50 percent of the national territory. This means that Thailand would need to have an additional 11.29 million *Rai* (3) (around 2 million hectares) of Reserve Forests and other conservation areas, and 15.99 million *Rai* (around 2.5 million hectares) of plantation areas by 2037.

To materialize these targets, several governmental agencies have issued laws and regulations specifically to support the carbon market, in particular REDD+ activities:

- The Royal Forest Department will expand Reserve Forests to an additional 4.5 million *Rai* (around 720 thousand hectares). This includes over 11,000 registered community forests with 300,000 *Rai* (around 50 thousand hectares);
- The Department of Marine and Coastal Resources will establish 3 million *Rai* of mangrove tree plantations (around 500 thousand hectares).
- The Department of National Parks will establish more Protected Areas, encompassing an area of 1.28 million *Rai* (around 205 thousand hectares).

Private companies are expected to earn 90 percent of the carbon credits (and profits) generated from this plan, with the remaining 10 percent for the government. There is no public information on how much community members who are hired as workers for doing the activities of forest management and the establishment of plantations will be paid. Certain activities, such as the

traditional controlled fires for swidden agriculture practices, which are considered as disrupting the carbon absorption function of the area, are prohibited.

A “Bio-Circular-Green Model” for Evicting Forest Communities

To further assist carbon market policy, Thailand has recently launched an economic development plan called ‘The BCG Model’ (The Bio-Circular-Green Model), which aims to increase 32 million *Rai* of ‘carbon forests’ (around 5.1 million hectares). This area is included in the 20 years plan and is set to be accomplished with the investment of large private companies. Yet, the BCG model has been criticized for its limited participation of local communities, as the domination of large companies. On October 5th, 2022, the Thai government also passed a resolution that allows private companies to invest in reforestation activities (plantations) in state-owned lands.

Many companies in Thailand, including from the fossil fuels, petrochemicals and cement industries, are keen to engage in establishing plantations as carbon credits, as these can be used to lessen the pressure on their own pollution as well as to create business opportunities. For example, the PTT Group (Petroleum Authority of Thailand Public Company Limited), one of the biggest oil companies in the country, has recently announced a plantation project for 2.1 million *Rai* (around 336,000 hectares).

Meanwhile, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation and the Exchange Commission of Thailand have been promoting ‘community forest management’ projects in the northern, central, and southern regions of the country. This program aims to cover 300,000 *Rai* (around 48,000 hectares) with the aim of increasing income for communities via the selling of carbon credits and of offsetting companies’ pollution. Each community that participates has to meet the requirements for registration with the Thailand Voluntary Emission Reduction Program (T-VER). (4)

The problem of structural injustice and unsustainable forest management has shown that these types of projects will lead to environmental destruction, violation of forest community rights, and increased conflicts between the companies, the government agencies and the forest communities.

In 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order passed a forest reclamation policy in the name of conservation. The government claims that they were able to reclaim 435,731 *Rai* (around 69 thousand hectares) of forests, however, this process led to the forced eviction of many forest communities, with more than 46,600 legal cases being filed against them. On top of this, the government plans to expand these conservation areas by creating 20 new national reserved parks.

There is a hidden agenda in the name of forest protection. The ultimate goal of this ‘forest reclamation’ policy for conservation is to maximize the number of hectares of forests under state ownership. These are now turned into ‘carbon sinks’ with a focus on generating profits for the private sector.

The many pieces of legislation passed in the name of forest conservation and climate mitigation have not been designed to protect the rights of forest communities, but rather to limit them from using their forests and lands and to encroach them into smaller areas.

Structural Problems by Reassessing Forests as Carbon Credits

There are many structural problems with this strong push for giving forests these new layers of economic interests and power. These include:

1. **There is not enough forested land to absorb all the fossil fuels' pollution**

The energy sector and other polluting companies do not aim to stop nor reduce the extraction and use of fossil fuels. Forests will never be able to absorb the carbon that is emitted from the fossil deposits underground.

2. **There are no empty forests**

Forest areas are inhabited by forest communities. When companies are authorized to establish plantations, this means community forests, mangroves and fertile land will be grabbed for producing carbon credits.

3. **Risk to over-claim carbon credits**

T-VER's credit accounting method includes plantations and restored forests. The reclamation of existing forests contradicts this as those forests have already been counted for carbon mitigation. Without clear criteria, there is a risk that companies will use this to further profit from this scheme.

4. **The carbon stored in trees is not permanent**

Forests are not machines; they have a cycle of absorbing and releasing carbon in each changing condition. Besides, political decisions and economic interests can also lead to large-scale deforestation or disasters such as wildfires. Yet, some of the carbon credits generated from those trees might already been accounted for and sold.

5. **Private companies have conflict of interests with public interests**

Private companies will generate profits from the carbon credits generated in the communities or state-owned forests. Meanwhile, the communities will merely be hired as laborers in their own land.

6. **Forests exist and are rooted in communities' wisdom and knowledge**

Forests are part of the human communities that have coexisted with them for generations, and these communities are part of the forests as well. These forests can regenerate themselves in a supportive environment. Thus, a monoculture plantation project, by definition, destroys the environment, the forests, and the interconnections with all living beings, including communities.

It is therefore imperative to ask 'What is the ultimate goal of carbon credits?'

The hype that the government, NGOs and polluting companies in Thailand have created around forest carbon credits creates a misconception that these will generate a mutual benefit for everyone. They claim, for example, that the government or the community that owns the forest generating the credits would benefit from receiving private investment. This assumes that forest communities would not be able to independently manage the forests without private investment and that such investment will make things easier and better. In reality, however, experience with these projects in tropical forests around the world shows that this largely results in internal conflicts, broken promises, food insecurity, among others. Carbon credits are only a tool for the private companies to continue releasing their polluting emissions and profit, without having to reduce any while claiming to be 'green' or 'carbon neutral'.

The carbon market in the forests of Thailand continues to grow. There is an insatiable demand for carbon credits that threatens to create a massive scale of land grabbing for protected areas and industrial plantations on the one side, and industrial agriculture, mining and fossil fuel extractive activities on the other.

It is time to expose that carbon credits have nothing to do with reducing greenhouse gas emissions or mitigating climate change. They are just another push for capitalist actors to expand their destruction in the forests.

Kritsada Boonchai

Thai Climate Justice for All, Thailand

(1) Thailand's National Forest Policy B.E. 2528 (1982) and subsequently amendment B.E. 2562 (2019). See the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2018-2037) here: <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Thailand.pdf>

(2) Carbon neutrality (Thai: การหักลบระหว่างการปล่อยคาร์บอนกับการลดหรือดูดคาร์บอน) refers to a supposed balance between the carbon emissions and the removal of carbon emissions from the atmosphere; this is made largely via offsets.

(3) A rai (Thai: ไร่) is a unit used in measuring land area. It is commonly used in Thailand and one rai is equivalent to 0.16 hectares

(4) Mae Fah Luang Foundation and SEC Innovate Carbon Credit Offsetting Project to Combat Climate Change, <https://www.maefahluang.org/en/carbon-credit-program/>

Nature-based Solutions: Corporate polluters keep fuelling climate chaos with greenwashing and junk offsets

Ending fossil fuel burning is urgent, yet oil and gas companies have been ramping up production and profits in 2022. Polluters greenwash their activities saying they offset their emissions with investments in 'nature-based solutions', which mean land grabbing, violence and corporate control over vast areas of land in the global South.

Ending fossil fuel burning is urgently needed to limit climate chaos, yet oil and gas corporations have been ramping up production and taken home bumper profits in 2022. They are not interested in keeping fossil fuels in the ground. Instead, corporate polluters not only from the oil and gas sector but also mining, aviation and IT companies and other high-emission industries try to greenwash their activities saying they offset their emissions with investments in 'nature-based solutions'. On the ground, this means land grabbing, violence and corporate control over vast areas of land in the global South. Carbon emissions, meanwhile, continue.

In March 2023, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its 'synthesis report for policy makers' on the panel's sixth assessment on the science of climate chaos. These reports are heavily negotiated documents that leave out as much as they say. The latest report, however, is remarkably blunt that "deep, rapid, and sustained" cuts to greenhouse gas emissions are needed during this decade to keep a chance of limiting uncontrollable climate chaos. Already in February, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres told the UN Human Rights Council that "fossil fuel producers and their financiers must understand one simple truth: Pursuing mega-profits when so many people are losing their lives and rights, now and in the future, is totally unacceptable." (1)

Those very fossil fuel producers, however, have been ramping up production and have taken home bumper profits in 2022. Shell, for example, reported the highest profits in 115 years. (2) Keeping oil and gas flowing is inevitably causing damage, not just to the climate but also to human and non-human life at the sites of extraction and along the entire supply chains. Corporations and trade associations like the American Petroleum Institute are fully aware of this. This is why they are spending billions of dollars on adverts with images of forests and a 'green, clean future' in which gas and oil companies are represented as the solutions to climate change. (3) These adverts divert attention away from the fact that releasing fossil carbon, which was buried in underground coal, oil and gas deposits for millions of years, into the atmosphere is the main cause of climate change. They often suggest that corporate emissions can be compensated with parking more carbon in forests, mangroves, trees or soils. Offsetting their emissions in this way, the companies claim, makes their products 'carbon neutral' or having a 'net-zero' emission balance. Fossil fuel burning, meanwhile, continues, and the concentration of fossil carbon in the atmosphere keeps rising, fuelling climate chaos.

A look at corporate ‘net-zero’ emission pledges across the oil and gas, mining, aviation and IT sectors shows that their promises to ‘decarbonize’ heavily rely on carbon offsetting. None of the corporations in these sectors has promised to stop fossil carbon extraction or use. This inevitably means more climate chaos. Companies hide this truth behind the false promise that there are ‘nature-based solutions’ (carbon offsetting schemes, in other words) that will make fossil fuel burning possible without damage to the climate.

Nature-based dispossessions

The concept of ‘nature-based solutions’ was introduced into the environmental vocabulary by conservation NGOs and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2016. Its main goal was to secure funding for the protected areas managed by these conservation NGOs. The idea: corporate polluters pay conservationist NGOs to store extra carbon in forests and the companies get carbon credits in return. (4) Their ‘fortress conservation’ approach has caused countless conflicts and violence against Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities whose territories are turned into protected areas for storing carbon in a ‘nature-based’ way. (5)

Restrictions on peasant practises and Indigenous Peoples’ use of these forests are justified by conservationist NGOs and the buyers of carbon credits with the claim that ‘it is important for the climate to protect the carbon stored in the forest’. Explicitly or implicitly, the use of forest commons, shifting cultivation practices and the use of controlled fires to prepare the land, are falsely blamed as drivers of deforestation while the large-scale corporate driven deforestation continues undisturbed. (6)

Companies across the oil and gas, mining, IT and aviation sectors as well as other high-emission industries, are strong supporters of the fake ‘nature-based solutions’ concept. More than that, they have been buying carbon credits from forest and soil carbon conservation projects that have put heavy restrictions on how peasants in Brazil and Indonesia, herders in northern Kenya and Indigenous Peoples in Peru can or cannot use their ancestral lands. (7) Many of these projects have also been shown to be selling ‘junk carbon credits’. (8) In those cases, it is very unlikely that the credits actually represent an additional tonne of carbon stored in trees, or an additional tonne of carbon that was not released into the atmosphere.

Shell for example, has been buying carbon credits from forest carbon projects in Indonesia and Peru. (9) The company’s nature-based dispossession to claim compensation of its fossil fuel emissions alone would require planting trees or changing community use of forests on at least 8.1 million hectares of land *per year*.

Global agribusiness and pulp and paper corporations also increasingly greenwash their violent industrial plantation model as a ‘nature-based solution’ to the climate crisis. Brazilian pulp and paper giant Suzano, for example, is looking into generating carbon credits from a massive expansion of tree plantations in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, where the company is

building the world's largest single eucalyptus pulp production mill. (10) Suzano has recently submitted documentation to earn carbon credits from its eucalyptus plantations and conservation areas within the plantations under the much-criticised Verra Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) system. (11)

In the mining sector, Rio Tinto was one of the first global mining corporations to resort to biodiversity offsetting to justify destruction of forests in Madagascar. At the Fort Dauphin mine, one of Rio Tinto's Madagascar subsidiaries, QMM, extracts the mineral titanium oxide (also called ilmenite) that is used to make white paint and other products. (12) In 2022, the company with a landholding of 4 million hectares worldwide announced that it was exploring the possibility to earn additional money from selling carbon credits from planting trees on the land it has previously destroyed through its mining operations. (13)

In 2015, the Anglo-Australian mining giant BHP was in the news for its responsibility over a dam rupture behind Brazil's worst environmental disaster which killed 19 and obliterated villages as a flood of mining waste swept into the Doce river and Atlantic Ocean over 650km (400 miles) away. (14) The following year, and in the context of BHP busy denying responsibility for the dam rupture in Brazil, the company announced a partnership with the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the conservationist NGO Conservation International to invest in forest conservation and get carbon credits in return for the investment. (15). In 2018, BHP also supported a REDD project (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) managed by the same NGO Conservation International and Peru's National Service for Natural Protected Areas Protected by the State (SERNANP). The Alto Mayo project covers an area of 182,000 hectares in the San Martín region of northern Peru and affects more than 5,000 people. In January 2023, the British newspaper The Guardian reported how families had been made homeless when their houses in the National Park were burned and that families were told this was now a carbon forest. (16) Since June 2008 the project has produced more than 7.4 million carbon credits that have been bought by companies including Microsoft, United Airlines, Disney, BHP and Gucci.

The leading corporate polluters in the aviation industry, too, greenwash continued growth in flights with compensation through nature-based 'solutions'. Major international airlines have been among the carbon credit buyers from each of the forest offset projects that have been in the news for either causing conflicts and restricting traditional use of the land or for selling junk carbon credits. (17) Air travel is a very exclusive form of transport. Approximately 80 per cent of the world population does not or cannot afford to fly. In 2018, only 2 to 4 per cent of the global population flew internationally and only 1 per cent of the world population – the frequent fliers - emit 50 per cent of carbon dioxide from commercial aviation (18).

In the IT sector, corporations from Amazon to Microsoft and Netflix resort to buying carbon credits and promoting 'nature-based solutions' to greenwash their massive and growing carbon footprint. Netflix and Facebook parent company Meta, for example, bought carbon credits from a soil carbon conservation project in northern Kenya. In its 'Blood Carbon' report Survival International shows that the project sold millions of junk credit. The project also "relies on

breaking down the Indigenous people's long-standing traditional grazing systems, and replacing them with a centrally controlled system more akin to commercial ranching". (19)

These are just some of the examples of how the world's largest polluters use carbon offsetting and nature-based dispossessions to hide their responsibility for the climate chaos as a result of their past and ongoing fossil fuel burning. Meanwhile, the economic, environmental and social costs mount and human suffering from ever more frequent and extreme droughts, heatwaves, storms and flooding is growing unbearably. Those hardest hit are communities on the frontlines of struggles for land and marginalized groups in societies.

In this context, social movements and civil society networks keep repeating that carbon offsetting is a dangerous distraction that slows down the building of momentum for the rapid and unavoidable end to fossil fuel burning. In 2021, for example, more than 360 groups said No to 'nature-based solutions' (20) and in March 2023, over 80 groups demanded that the European Union reject carbon offsets following a series of scandals showing that millions of carbon credits issued by the largest voluntary carbon offset standard, Verra's Verified Carbon Standard, were 'junk' credits. (21)

Where 'nature-based solutions' offsets hit the ground, communities resist the restrictions they impose on their ways of life and livelihoods. This resistance at the land grabbing end of the carbon offset equation brings to light a main injustice behind carbon offsetting: communities in the global South are forced to change their way of life so corporations can continue to profit from fossil fuel extraction and the capitalist growth model that is fuelling the climate crisis.

Jutta Kill, jutta@wrm.org.uy
Member of the WRM Secretariat

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FROM THE WRM BULLETIN ARCHIVES

March 2018 WRM Bulletin

Women and plantations: When violence becomes invisible

In this month of March, we remember a bulletin that denounces the layers of oppression that women living around plantations confront. Monocultures impose violence, especially on women, who are pillars of community life. We stand in solidarity with those women who suffer from, resist, and organize against this systematic oppression.

<https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/women-and-plantations-when-violence-becomes-invisible>

RECOMMENDED

The plantation model in Chile: the cause of megafires

In early 2023, Chile once again experienced megafires which caused devastating damage to affected regions. The dominant debates, however, make no mention of what a report from the Center for Climate and Resilience Research (CR2) made clear: “50% of the areas that burned as a result of megafires from 1985 to 2018 were covered with exotic tree plantations”—mainly pine and eucalyptus trees. The [megafire problem stems from](#) the fact that huge areas of industrial plantations greatly facilitate the expansion of fires, as Chilean news service El Resumen reports. In 2018, [a WRM bulletin article](#) already warned about megafires in relation to the Chilean plantation industry and its total impunity. In this context, we once again recommend viewing the documentary, “Flames of Dispossession. Fires of the Forestry Business,” which seeks to promote debate about one of the many problems that the tree plantation industry brings to communities where it operates: fires. [It can be viewed in Spanish here](#).

Peru: Proposed “Genocidal Law” against uncontacted Indigenous Peoples

A sector of Peruvian Congress with ties to the logging and fossil fuel industries presented a bill, which, if passed, would lead to certain extermination of the country’s Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation. The bill was presented in November of 2022 in the midst of social upheaval in the country. The proposed Law would eliminate the recognition, and therefore the rights, of the 25 indigenous groups in a state of voluntary isolation or initial contact. Furthermore, the Law seeks to overturn the indigenous reserves that have already been established for these Peoples, thus opening their territories to extractive industries. It also threatens to prevent the creation of four other reserves that have not yet been recognized. Historically, these Peoples have been ‘contacted’ many times—with most such ‘contacts’ being characterized by violence instigated by industries, missionaries and the government. But this Law would take this violence to a much more worrying level. AIDSESEP, the largest national organization of Indigenous Peoples, [has strongly condemned the bill, and is calling on civil society](#) in general to denounce this proposed Law—as it could mean

genocide for these peoples. You can sign a petition by the organization, Survival, to stop this bill: [in Spanish](#) and [in English](#).
[Read about this bill in English, here.](#)

“The Green Energy Scandal”: Drax receives subsidies for burning forests

An investigation from BBC’s Panorama uncovers how British power company Drax is linked to forests being logged in British Columbia, Canada. Drax switched from burning coal to burning wood pellets, which gave the company millions of taxpayers’ money from “green” subsidies. Emissions from burning wood pellets, in the UK, are considered “carbon neutral” and hence are not considered in the GHG accounting sheets. This is just one aspect of the deceitful narrative of “biomass” that the investigation tackles. [You can watch the documentary here in English](#). And if this was not be enough, [Drax has recently partnered with a company called C-Zero](#) to use “Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS)”, which falsely claims to capture and *permanently* store carbon dioxide from *bioenergy* generation. BECCS is misleadingly classified as a “carbon removals technology”, based on the false assumption that biomass energy is “carbon neutral” and that capturing and storing the emissions from burning wood makes it “carbon negative” – meaning, claiming more subsidies! [Read more about the problems with this BECCS technology in a report from Biofuel Watch in English here](#)

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Editor: Joanna Cabello

Editorial Assistants: Lucía Guadagno, Edmundo Hoppe Oderich, Jutta Kill, Winfridus Overbeek and Teresa Pérez

WRM International Secretariat

Av. Bolivia 1962 Bis, CP 11500 Montevideo, Uruguay

Phone/Fax: +598 26056943

wrm@wrm.org.uy / <http://www.wrm.org.uy>