

TROPICAL RAINFORESTS

a plan for action

The world's tropical rainforests are being destroyed at the rate of 40 hectares every minute. Their destruction has been described as "the greatest natural calamity since the Ice Age", "the greatest biological disaster ever perpetrated by humans" and "a threat to civilisation second only to thermonuclear war." In response to this terrible threat, concerned people around the world are marshalling forces to save the forests. The editors of the English magazine The Ecologist have written the following abridged article on a possible solution to the problem.

The World Resources Institute Report

The World Resources Institute (WRI), in conjunction with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, has produced a lengthy report calling for action to end tropical deforestation.

The report outlines a five-year action programme – to cost \$8,000 million – aimed at providing fuelwood, promoting agroforestry, reafforesting upland watersheds, conserving tropical forest ecosystems, and strengthening institutions for research, training and extension.

The taskforce consisted of government ministers, directors of state forestry agencies, representatives of logging companies and paper manufacturers, together with a representative of the World Bank. No conservationist or ecologist or member of an independent (that is, non-government funded) environmental organisation was included, nor were any tribal peoples from those areas most directly affected by tropical deforestation. Significantly, the plan was rejected outright by Non-Governmental Organisations from 10 countries at a meeting in 1987.

Firstly, the WRI report is based on the premise that poverty, over-population and ignorance are the prime causes of forest destruction. Blaming the poor for deforestation, however, is a gross and evil charge. To blame colonising peasants for burning the rainforests is tantamount to blaming soldiers for causing wars. Peasant colonists

carry out much of the work of deforestation in Central America, but they are mere pawns in a general's game.

Making scapegoats of the poor and dispossessed not only obscures the reasons for their poverty but detracts from the real causes of deforestation – namely, the massive commercial development schemes being promoted in the Third World.

Plantations and ranching projects, for example, have laid waste to millions of hectares of forest. In Ethiopia, the Awash Valley has been stripped of its trees to make way for plantations, 60 per cent of the land now being under cotton with another 22 per cent devoted to sugar. In Central America, cattle ranching is responsible for the clearance of almost two-thirds of the forests. In Brazil official government statistics reveal that 60 per cent of forest destruction between 1966 and 1975 was caused by large-scale ranching schemes (3,865,271 hectares) and road building (3,075,000 hectares).

Dams too are a cause of massive and irreversible deforestation. In Brazil, the Tucuruí project, has flooded some 216,000 hectares of virgin forest. Near Manaus, in northwestern Amazonia, the Balbina dam will flood 2,346 square kilometres. All told, the dams planned for Amazonia are expected to flood an area the size of Montana, much of it forest.

Blaming the poor for deforestation also overlooks the fact that millions of peasant colonists have been actively encouraged to invade the forests under government-sponsored colonisation schemes. In Indonesia,

more than 3,600,000 peasants from Java have already been moved into the densely forested outer island of the archipelago under the country's Transmigration Programme. At a conservative estimate, more than 3,300,000 hectares of rainforest are threatened by the project. In Brazil, colonisation schemes are held directly responsible for 17 per cent of forest destruction between 1966 and 1975.

Moreover, the problem of peasant settlers cannot be separated from the problem of landlessness in the Third World. At present, land holdings are concentrated in the hands of very few people – 93 per cent of arable lands in Latin America being held by a mere 7 per cent of land owners. Much of that land is used for plantation agriculture or ranching – thus denying its use to poor farmers, many of whom have been ruthlessly dispossessed of their own lands, often at the point of a gun. In the absence of land reforms, those farmers then have little choice but to invade the forests.

Blaming poverty for deforestation also ignores the fact that the best protected forests of the world are inhabited by those very tribal peoples who, by the standards of industrialised humans, are among the world's poorest. Indeed, most lack all but the simplest material possessions and have no access to the creature comforts, such as piped water, that we equate with a minimum standard of living. Yet it is these very people who are fighting hardest to protect the forest. Thus in Sarawak, the local tribes have been waging a desperate campaign to stop the logging of their forests. The response of the Malaysian Government has been brutal,



Slash and burn methods destroy invaluable rainforest and leave an infertile soil which is little suited to agriculture. Photo: Mark Bellingham