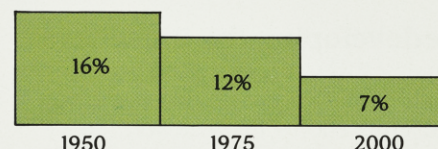


Until the middle of this century the tropical rainforests were hardly affected by human activity. Slash-and-burn cultivation was on a limited scale and adequate regeneration took place. Since then destruction has occurred at ever-increasing speed – for cultivation of crops and utilitarian trees, timber extraction, mineral and oil exploitation, and in some places for ill-conceived ranching schemes. The block diagram above indicates the percentage of rainforest in relation to total landmass in 1950 and 1975 and as projected for the year 2000 if annihilation continues at present rates. The map shows the extent of tropical forest in 1975 and, in red, the main fronts of its felling and burning.



many of the tribesmen having been recently arrested in an attempt to break their blockade of the logging roads. Yet, the government still insists, contrary to all evidence, that the tribesmen are to blame for the deforestation.

Blaming the poor for deforestation also serves to rationalise, and hence legitimise, the view that current development policies can (and should) continue unabated, and that deforestation can be halted without any need for politico-economic sacrifices of any kind. Indeed, the WRI plan goes further than this. It interprets the problem in such a way as to justify further schemes which, though politically and economically expedient, are socially and ecologically destructive: in this case, the setting up of vast plantations of fast-growing exotics, such as eucalyptus which not only fail to fulfil most of the ecological functions of natural forests, but which actually have a serious adverse impact on the environment. What is more, as the Environmental Defense Fund points out, little of the wood grown under India's World Bank funded "social forestry" programme, which is held up as a model by the WRI, is available to the poor: instead it almost all goes for pulp and rayon manufacture.

Finally, the plan does not even mention the rights of those indigenous peoples who inhabit the world's tropical forests and who depend on them for their livelihood.

Clearly, a radically new approach is required if deforestation is to be halted and a global catastrophe averted. The forests cannot

possibly be saved if we continue to see them as but another resource to be cashed in. They are indeed a resource, but not because they can be transformed into commodities to be sold on the open market. They are a resource in the sense in which the planet itself, the sun and the atmosphere are resources; they make life possible and must therefore be preserved in that state which enables them to do so.

To achieve our goal will require an elaborate plan made up of a number of carefully coordinated steps. Its implementation will span many decades and will require the close cooperation of international institutions, national governments, non-governmental organisations, action groups and millions of committed individuals. The stages of the plan are as follows:

The first step in the plan involves taking advantage of the present impasse created by the Third World's massive debt to the western banking system. This debt now stands at approximately a trillion dollars. Interest payments are so high that Third World countries are now paying more money to the West than they are receiving in aid – in 1986, by a margin of about \$29 billion.

There is of course no way in which such payments can be sustained for very long. Already several countries, notably Peru and Brazil, have come close to defaulting on their interest payments, and many more look like following suit. At the July 1987 Annual Meeting of the Organisation for African Unity, 50 members states requested an amnesty of \$200 billion worth of debts, ad-

mitting quite openly that "the problem is not one of liquidity but rather of complete inability to pay".

In order to service the interest on their debts, Third World countries have drastically increased the rate at which they are plundering their natural resources, including their forests, thus adding to the environmental and social costs of the debt crisis.

Several western banks, led by Citicorp, have now made provisions against countries defaulting on their debts. The acceptance that many loans will never be repaid has opened up the possibility of turning the debt crisis to ecological good.

Already two "Debt-for-Nature" swaps have been carried out by environmental groups. Thus in the US, Conservation International negotiated to buy \$650,000 worth of Bolivia's debt at a discounted rate of \$100,000. The debt was then written off in exchange for the Bolivian Government undertaking to set aside 3.7 million acres of rainforest in an area adjacent to the existing Beni Biosphere Reserve in Amazonia. A similar agreement has been reached between the World Wildlife Fund and the Costa Rican Government leading to the setting aside of a substantial area of forest as a national park.

It is not suggested that these Debt-for-Nature swaps are the ultimate solution to the problem of forest preservation. They are not. It is possible to criticise them on a number of counts. One obvious problem is the possibility that, having set aside small areas of forest under debt-swap agreements, there will be a temptation to exploit what forests remain. However, debt swaps