

Conservation and development of tropical forest at the international level

B. Zentilli

THE SITUATION

Nineteen years ago the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) expressed the world's concern regarding the sustainable management of natural resources and approved an environmentally oriented Action Plan. By the late seventies several initiatives were being put together in different international organizations to address several aspects related to the assessment, rational use and conservation of these resources and to evaluate the threat to which they were exposed.

During the last decade or two the world has witnessed and increased concern for the fate of forests and for the tropical forests in particular. As a result of this concern several initiatives have been launched at the international level to address the assessment of forest resources, to better understand the problems being faced and to find remedies to the basic causes of these problems. Some of these actions are directly related to forests. Others have an indirect but still positive effect. They would still need however to be assessed during a longer term to evaluate their real results.

The Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species (CITES) for example, even though not directly concerned with tropical areas, focused many of its activities on tropical species of flora and fauna (Washington, 1972). The same can be perceived regarding the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971) which, even though being of global application, has initiated conservation of several wetlands in the Tropics.

The United Nations Environment Programme established on the basis of the Stockholm Conference, launched in 1980, together with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), now called World Wide Fund, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the World Conservation Strategy. Ten years later the WCS is under revision. The new version, which should be launched shortly, addresses in more details new approaches to sustainable management of natural resources.

By 1980, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with UNEP produced the first global assessment of tropical forests, covering 76 countries and disclosing the dramatic situation of these forest ecosystems. At that time it was estimated that for the approximately 2.900.000.000 ha of tropical forests (all types), close to 11.000.000 ha were being destroyed worldwide per year (an average of 0.6% of the total stock). Plantation efforts, mainly of monocultures of fast growing species were of the order of 1.000.000 ha per year in these same countries.

By the mid 1970s UNCTAD and FAO initiated action towards the development of a commodity agreement on tropical timber trade. The initiative succeeded, after close to seven years of negotiations to launch the International Tropical Timber Agreement of 1983 (ITTA). The agreement which includes aspects not usual to other commodity agreements, such as management and conservation of tropical forest resources and assured the participation of non-governmental organizations in its deliberation, came into force in April 1985. It was the basis for the establishment in Yokohama, Japan, of the International Tropical Timber Organization. Its members are countries producing tropical timber (19) and consumers (24) which, apart from Egypt, are all developed countries.

In 1979 the UNEP Governing Council requested its Executive Director to initiate action towards the development of international action to revert the destruction and pressures affecting tropical forests. Following two experts meetings, organized in collaboration with FAO and UNESCO in Nairobi in 1980 and in Rome in 1982, the UNEP Governing Council decided to have the action transferred to the FAO Committee on Forest Development in the Tropics (CFDT). Following the preparation of an analysis done by the World Resources Institute, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank and published under the title "Tropical Forests: a call for actions", FAO prepared the Tropical Forestry Action Plan which was later endorsed by the World Forestry Congress (Mexico 1985), the FAO CFDT and later the FAO Council and Conference and launched in late 1985.

Today 86 countries have applied for support of the TFAP. Despite the strong interest of these and other governments in developing National Forestry Action plans (NFAP) strong criticism was raised in several quarters, particularly by non-governmental organizations, which blamed the TFAP process of accelerating deforestation: not taking into account the need of local and indigenous people nor ensuring their participation in the process, ignoring issues such as the relation between forests and climate change or the role forests play in conservation of biological diversity, etc. As a result of that criticism FAO appointed an Independent Review Team to assess the situation and make recommendations for its redressment. The report made extensive recommendations for the reorientation of the TFAP. Some of

those recommendations are now in the process of implementation and some are still being considered by the agencies and governments concerned.

Following the International Conference on Man and Biosphere UNESCO launched the Man and Biosphere Programme. Composed of several subprogrammes, the MAB has launched a long list of activities related to research, training and management of tropical forests. Most of them are developed in collaboration with national institutions. This initiative has been able to mobilize resources towards conservation and rational utilization of tropical forests.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has its own active programme in Tropical Forests and provides technical assistance and funds and has launch several projects oriented towards the sustainable management of tropical forests.

The International Centre for Research on Agroforestry (ICRAF), located in Nairobi supports research and training on agroforestry worldwide. It has been recently incorporated as one of the main centre for forest research (on agroforestry) under the new initiatives being developed to reinforce forest research in general under the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). In this respect discussions are being held for the establishment of a centre or service for forestry research under the (CGIAR).

The International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), a century old non-governmental organization, has a Special Programme for Developing Countries, which focuses mainly in research in tropical forests.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) has recently launched a project for the research on Social Dynamics on Deforestation which includes site-specific research in Central America, Brazil, Tanzania, etc.

The preparatory process for the organization of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has also included deforestation as one of its major concerns. Governments have requested the Secretary General of the Conference to prepare a comprehensive document on forests and propose a set of principles as the basis for discussions on an eventual international consensus on forests. Some actions of global significance will certainly be proposed under the programme for the XXI century in what has been called the Agenda 21.

THE BALANCE

Despite all those efforts it is still evident that forests are still under strong pressure and are being continuously degraded or destroyed. The pressures on temperate and boreal forests in developed countries are mainly due to acid precipitation affecting soils, water and the trees and uncontrolled fires and pests. In the developing countries in the temperate and tropical regions the cause are mainly based on the pressure for land. Preliminary figures put together by FAO in preparation for the Global Assessment of Forest Resources are indicating that over 17 million hectares of tropical forests are currently being destroyed per year. This increase of 6 million over the figures estimated in 1980 may be a net increase or a combination of increased destruction with more accurate information. Some independent sources have calculated the current figures of forest destruction in the tropical countries at over 20 million hectares per year. Exact figures regarding the destruction of forests in non-tropical developing countries are so far inaccurate or not available.

Even though the process of destruction of forests is not something new - the Romans had cleared forest in Britain for military and food purposes the current destruction and degradation of tropical, temperate and high latitude forests have more dramatic and irreversible effects on the world environment due to its shorter time frame. the loss of biological diversity, the effects on climate. the loss of habitats for human indigenous communities and their wealth of knowledge. Forest destruction has also significant effects on soil conservation. water cycles, disruption of fresh-water and coastal fisheries production, protection of infrastructure against avalanches and landslides, degradation of recreation areas and scenery and the contribution of greenhouse-gases to the atmosphere.

Forest covered lands have been very often considered as a free and available land bank on which to draw for other land-use purposes. Too often however this has been done without assessing the capacity of that land to maintain the new use permanently.

Forests have furthermore been assessed and evaluated mainly on the basis of their timber productivity. which in some cases is only a small proportion of its value. No practical methodologies to assess the real value of the forest are yet available and decision makers are left with inaccurate and incomplete information when deciding on the future of forest land use.

Forest management as applied today in developing countries is mainly an extractive process focusing on timber. Most of the silvicultural measures and management plans are derived from

methodologies developed in the developed countries environment, in the temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere and under very different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions.

Forest destruction is today a global concern and affects developed and developing countries. The reversal of the present trends is the responsibility of people and governments worldwide. The identification of adequate solutions should carefully consider the problems faced at the national level taking into consideration the local populations needs for raw materials energy, land space and cultural values.