

# Why a sustainable forest policy is so difficult

Establishing a sensible forest policy is a difficult task for many countries. One of the reasons for this is the multitude of actors demanding a say. On the other hand, influential pressure groups may seek to thwart such a policy. The following article shows what instruments can contribute to sustainable forest management.

In the years before the 1992 Rio Conference, attempts were made at international level to create a generally binding framework and principles for the sustainable management and conservation of forests. An international convention that would mean obligations and commitments at national level was seen by many experts as the only option to stem the relentless destruction of the forests. This notion failed to assert itself against the national interests of countries with much forest, so that only a non-legally binding declaration on forests was achieved in Rio. Since then, various UN bodies (including United Nations Forum on Forests – UNFF, UN Commission on Sustainable Development – CSD, United Nations Environment Programme – UNEP) have been making efforts to develop and implement international regulations, albeit with modest success.

However, what is even more important than international forest policy is for politics to address at national level the role that forests should have in national development. This is an issue that most developing countries are

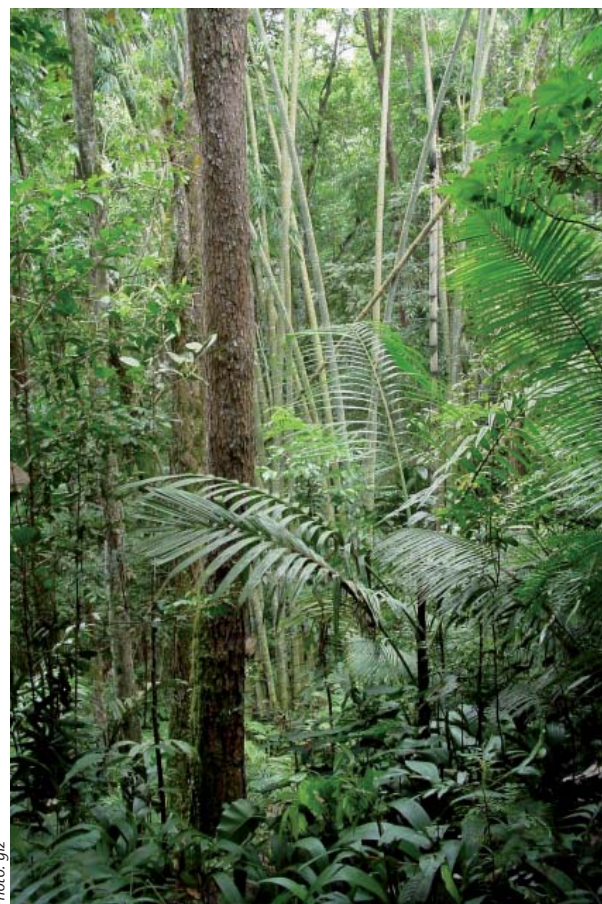
having difficulty with since other topics, such as agricultural or infrastructure development, are given priority. And here is a further dilemma for the forest. Its fate is determined very strongly by other policies. Export-oriented agricultural policy (e.g. soy, palm oil) has resulted in forest destruction in Bolivia and Brazil, or in Indonesia. In energy politics, the EU's announcement to step up the use of biofuels in future has resulted in the transformation of forests, too. Major road-building projects inevitably cause spontaneous settlements to develop along the road routes, entailing forest clearing.

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## ■ Everyone wants to have a say

As a rule, practising the drafting of a forest policy is relatively simple, although things will often get tough and tedious when it comes to implementing it in the shape of forest legislation and rules and regulations. For one thing, this is due to the multitude and range of interests that the different groups of actors have in the forest. These interests need to be adequately considered in a participatory

process, and in many cases, they have to be harmonised. Actors must understand the point of a law and accept it. Only then will its objective, that of sustainable forest management, be achieved. This takes time, especially if natural forest is at issue. In Chile, for example, it took 15 years of debating before the law on the “Restoration of Native Forest and Forest Development” could be adopted in 2008.



*Numerous policy areas impact on the exploitation of forest resources.*

Photo: giz

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Then there are still influential persons or groups in many countries who are keen to keep forests “lawless”, for illegal or non-regulated exploitation of wood or timber resources offers considerable profits. These actors therefore have little interest in a “regulated” forest sector and engage in corresponding lobbying to delay the drafting and adoption of laws. Just how weak government forest policy can be is demonstrated by the example of Bolivia. Whereas around 150,000 hectares of forest was lost each year in the eighties and roughly 250,000 hectares a year between 1990 and 2000, this value rose to about 350,000 hectares a year in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even the progressive forestry law adopted in 1996 was unable to do anything about this dynamic. Also we should always bear in mind that weak forest governance almost always leads to corruption and violence in forest areas.

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■ **How forests are used today: little management – much exploitation!**

The boreal and temperate forests of Europe and North America are managed mainly in the context of a multifunctional approach using medium- to long-term plans. Multifunctional means that beyond the production of timber, protective and recreational functions and the capacity of forests to provide a variety of ecosystem services (water, biodiversity, positive climatic impacts, etc.) are adequately considered. As a rule, except for small areas at regional level, the use of non-timber products such as oils, resins and fruits only plays a subordinate role. In most countries of Europe and North America, sustainability principles are observed. This means that as far as possible, the forest area is kept at a constant level or extended and only annual timber growth is harvested. In Germany, for instance, annual timber growth is at roughly 90 million cubic

*Oil palm cropping is a very lucrative business. Valuable natural forests are frequently clear-cut for this purpose.*

metres, while only 65 to 70 million cubic metres is harvested. Over the last 15 years, forest area has grown by an annual 3,500 hectares.

In many developing countries that are rich in woodlands, management plans with a time horizon of 20 to 40 years are in place in state-owned or private enterprises, especially in export-oriented or certified enterprises. However, they tend to be more of an exception than the rule, and in terms of area, they are of only little importance. The franchise system, with the state as the owner awarding one- to several-year forest-use licences to private enterprises, is still widespread. Obviously, with this short-term “exploitation model”, an enterprise cannot be expected to invest in a forest’s future. It is generally assumed that between 40 and 70 percent of logging and timber trade is performed illegally in the developing countries. As a result of these processes, a slow degradation of the forest will often set in, with smallholders starting settlements at some point, or the forest being transformed into pasture.

Many of these countries also differ considerably from industrialised countries in terms of how forests are used. Often, the forests are primarily a source of firewood, while gathering fruits, medicinal plants or fibres as building material may be equally important. This is carried out mainly in an extractive form, and only rarely according to any plan. Therefore, there is a high probability of over-exploitation, which sooner or later results in the resource being destroyed. Uncontrolled game-hunting must also be mentioned in this context. In several countries, bushmeat is an important food source. The disastrous consequence of this is not only that many animal species are exterminated, but that the forest’s abil-



ity to reproduce itself is jeopardised, too. A wide range of animals ensure the distribution of seeds, forming an important link in the forest as a “living network”.

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■ **Sustainable forest management – it may not be easy, but it can be done!**

The three most important and indispensable preconditions for sustainable forest management are:

1. a straightforward and secured property situation,
2. clear and accepted rules and
3. sufficient and qualified staff.

**Ad 1:** In many developing countries, the number and accuracy of maps



Photo: J. Boethling

will decrease the further away you are from the capital or other major cities. This similarly applies to the ownership titles in the cadastral land survey. The deeper you drive into rural areas, the greater the likelihood of “unclear property titles”. Often, the state will be the largest forest owner, without having the legal means and necessary technical staff to really manage or protect its forests. How can sustainable forest management be possible if – as in the case of Peru – an area has been simultaneously designated a “reserve” and an “indigenous territory”, and at the same time, the right to drill for oil in it has been awarded as well?

**Ad 2:** In many countries, forests are over-regulated. This may sound provocative, but comparing the flood of

legislation on forests with the handful of laws governing agriculture, this fact becomes quite obvious. Before trees are allowed to be cut, a long-term plan, an annual plan, possibly an environmental compatibility assessment, a wide range of maps, a transport permit, etc. have to be provided. Often, all this has to be arranged far away from the logging activities themselves, in the state capital. It may take weeks, and additionally one has to deal with the arbitrary nature of the authorities.

**Ad 3:** In most tropical countries which are rich in woodlands, staffing is insufficient at all levels. Whereas in Germany, a forest warden and several professional forest workers are responsible for a forestry district, the smallest oper-

ative unit, of approximately 1,000 to 5,000 hectares, the areas that a forest warden has to look after in, e.g., South America are at least ten to twenty times larger. Regarding the training of forestry staff, conditions among the forestry engineers are good and sufficient in some countries, and there is enough specialist staff for the planning and administrative levels. Over the last few years, however, the job profile of forestry executive staff has changed. In addition to subject knowledge and being familiar with international sets of regulations, an increasing degree of intercultural dialogue and negotiating skills is required. There is generally a severe lack of forestry technical staff, and the professional woodsman is virtually non-existent. But it is these staff in particular who are crucial to the sustainable management of forests at local level, e.g. when it comes to introducing and maintaining natural rejuvenation or implementing the rules of low-impact logging.

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### ■ Steering the process: financial incentives are most effective

Without ignoring that the crucial steering factors in forest conservation are the development policies in the agricultural, energy and infrastructure sectors, several instruments are available in promoting forest management. The effects of tax and financial incentives seem obvious once we look at the field of afforestation activities worldwide. Here, one of the “oldest” examples is Chile, which, under President Frei, initiated “Ley 1700” in the 1970s, an afforestation project that was to lead to prosperous forest management developments in the following years. But there are also positive examples regarding natural forests. In the course of implementing the “Payments for environmental services” concept, forest owners in Costa Rica are awarded direct financial aid to manage and maintain natural forests. The model is successful, and alongside other meas-

### Forests and sustainability – inseparably linked

The concept of “sustainability” is always addressed when human beings perceive a lack of natural resources. This was also the case when, alarmed by the devastated forests in Central Europe, Georg Ludwig Hartig wrote in 1804: “No lasting forestry can be conceived or expected if no stock check is made of a forest’s wood output. Therefore, any wise forestry directorate has to levy a tax on the state’s forests without delay and, while keeping its level as high as possible, seek to use revenue to ensure at least as much of a benefit from it as the present generation appropriates.” The bottom line of this is not to live on assets but on their yields. Then there were Dennis L. Meadows and his colleagues, who, in their 1972 publication “The limits to growth”, described the finite character of natural resources and called for a more careful handling of them.

#### ■ The three pillars of sustainability

In the years between 1983 and 1993, sustainability was intensively debated. Results became manifest in 1987, in the definition that the Final Report, “Our common future”, of the World Commission on Environment and Sustainability (Brundtland Commission), contains: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Later on, this was also reflected at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio in important international conventions (e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity) and declarations (e.g. the Forest Principles). At times, experts were handling more than 80 definitions, although a concept of “sustainable development” formed on the basis of the “three-pillar model” of “economic feasibility”, “social acceptance” and “environmental compatibility” has since become generally recognised. Only the consistency, the consensus and, ideally, the congruence of these three principles offer a high degree of probability that a sustainable course of development really has been opted for.

For a while, with a booming globalised world economy, things remained silent regarding the topic of sustainability. It was only when the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change 2006, referring to the consequences of climate change, appeared that the issue came more to the fore again in political and social debates – and with it the forest! Since then, its outstanding role in preventing and mitigating the impact of climate change has been high on the international and national political agenda. The wide range of initiatives addressing our current mode of production and consumption and proposing alternatives (e.g. ecological footprint, energy efficiency, regional production and marketing, “slow food” and much more) reflect the new debate on sustainability and anxiety over the future of humankind and the Earth. It is really high time, too, as a glance at essential facts on world development (see Table), which are also of considerable importance for the future of the forest, shows!

#### World development facts

<b>World population</b>	1800: 1 billion; end of 2011: 7 billion; 2050: 9 billion (?)
<b>Social inequality</b>	1 billion people are living in poverty, with the gulf between “poor” and “rich” becoming ever wider.
<b>Forest</b>	10,000 B.C. approx. 6 billion hectares; today approx. 3.6 billion hectares; loss since 1950 approx. 500 million hectares
<b>Agriculture</b>	Out of approx. 1.5 billion hectares of cultivated area, approx. 12 million hectares is lost each year.
<b>Deserts</b>	Approx. 0.5 % annual increase of semi-arid and arid areas, which means that approx. 8 million hectares has desertified each year.
<b>Water</b>	By 2030, it will be possible to cover only an average of 60 percent of the demand in developing countries.
<b>Energy</b>	Between 1950 and 2004, mineral oil consumption grew eightfold, from 470 million tons to 3,770 million tons a year, while that of gas grew fourteen-fold, from 170 million tons to 2,400 million tons a year.

ures, it has resulted in forests expanding in Costa Rica rather than shrinking as is the case of other countries in Central America. Tax benefits for landowners reserving a certain percentage of their property for forests are currently being tried out in Mata atlantica, the Atlantic rainforest in Brazil.

#### ■ Usufruct: success depends on the type of forest

The regulation of land ownership rights and of usufruct is closely linked. In the past, there has been success with awarding usufruct in state forests – above all because of weaknesses on the part of states in controlling the use of these rights, but also due to disputes and competition between the individual users. Negotiating and exercising usufruct works better in the context of community ownership. A good example is forest management carried out for several years by “ejidos” – a process whereby the government promotes the use of communal lands shared by the people of the community – in Quintana Roo/ Mexico. A further successful example of using forests sustainably is the commercialisation of the Brazil nut (*Bertholletia excelsa*) in the Province of Madre de Dios/Peru or in the Department Pando/Bolivia. Here, in addition to economic gains, the high degree of organisation among the communities of gatherers guarantees the conservation of the forest.

Forest management in the tropics and subtropics is not a technical or forestry problem. Over the last few decades, forest science has come up with a wealth of basic knowledge on the ecology of tree species, growth dynamics, wood properties, etc. that provides sufficient certainty and criteria for sustainable management. And sensible management regulations ensuring a maximum of certainty about sustainable use can be deduced from what is now more than 30 years of practical

experience. All these insights are also reflected in the principles and criteria for sustainable forest management that the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) compiled in the middle of the 1990ies (see page 16). Alarmed by the continuing high forest loss rates, the FSC aimed to promote sustainable forest management via the issue of an internationally recognised certificate. An incentive for sustainable forest management was also intended to be obtained by improving the price of timber from certified enterprises. Unfortunately, this hope has remained unfulfilled. While certified enterprises do, as a rule, offer better access to the markets of Europe and the USA, they have failed to achieve any substantial improvements in the prices of their products. What can also be observed is that the area certified in accordance with the FSC, having significantly grown in the first few years, has since stagnated. Nevertheless, at individual enterprise level, certification has to be acknowledged as a success. In most cases, the exercise of transforming processes in companies has resulted in efficiency gains, and fulfilling framework conditions in more legal and ownership security.

### ■ Conclusion: Reduce the strain on the forests!

Today, exponential population growth, energy consumption, pro-

*Sustainable exploitation of the forests is more of a political problem than a technical one.*

duction and consumer behaviour are exceeding the Earth's sustainability two- to fourfold. The planet's very substance is being used up. If today's strategy of a one-sided growth- and market-oriented economic policy is retained, ecological and social disaster will become unavoidable. Only a U-turn to an economic policy giving priority to ecological and social requirements can prevent such disaster. Observing the principle of "living on yields, not on assets", the following concrete steps are required:

1. All of the Earth's states ought to commit themselves to a responsible planetary population policy and take concrete measures to tackle this issue.
2. Non-renewable natural resources, such as mineral oil and metals, ought to be used in a socially responsible manner and with a maximum of efficiency in order to postpone their exhaustion as far as possible into the future.
3. The potential of renewable resources ought to be further researched, and the concept of life-cycle management should be implemented intensively.



Photo: giz

4. The efficiency of energy use ought to be enhanced, and
5. fossil fuel sources ought to be made intelligent use of for the transition to a "low-carbon energy age".

The above-mentioned steps would significantly reduce current pressure on forest resources. Thus the prospects for implementing multifunctional management and conservation models of forests, which we are going to depend on so urgently in the future, could improve. These vital roles include mitigating the effects of climate change, lessening the severity of extreme weather situations, low-cost provision of drinking-water, an inexhaustible genetic reservoir needed in the future, and providing habitats for indigenous peoples.

Only if neither poverty nor greediness cause people to clear the forests will forests have a future!

### Zusammenfassung

Eine vernünftige Waldpolitik durchzusetzen, fällt vielen Ländern schwer. Das liegt zum einen daran, dass unterschiedliche Politikbereiche – etwa Energiepolitik, Außenwirtschaftspolitik – eng mit der Forstpolitik verknüpft sind und die Interessen zahlreicher Akteure unter einen Hut gebracht werden müssen. Zudem verspricht die unregelmäßige Ausbeutung der Wälder hohe Profite. Für eine nachhaltige Waldpolitik sind drei Faktoren unerlässlich: Eindeutige und gesicherte Besitzverhältnisse, klare und von allen Beteiligten akzeptierte Regeln sowie ausreichendes und qualifiziertes Personal. Steuerliche und

finanzielle Anreize haben sich in vielen Ländern als wirksames Instrument bewährt, um die Aufforstung, aber auch den Erhalt des Naturwaldes zu fördern. Auch die Zertifizierung hat entscheidende Erfolge gebracht, wenn auch nicht alle gesteckten Ziele erreicht werden konnten.

### Resumen

A muchos países les resulta difícil imponer una política forestal razonable. Esto se debe a que, por un lado, otros ámbitos diversos de políticas – como la política energética o la de comercio exterior – se vinculan estrechamente con la política forestal. Por otro, es necesario conciliar los

intereses de numerosos actores. Además, la explotación no regulada de los bosques promete pingües ganancias. Para una política forestal sostenible, existen tres requisitos indispensables: derechos de propiedad inequívocos y garantizados, normas claras y aceptadas por todos los participantes, y suficiente personal calificado. En muchos países, los incentivos tributarios y financieros han demostrado ser un instrumento eficaz para promover la reforestación y la conservación de los bosques primarios. También la certificación ha traído consigo éxitos decisivos, a pesar de que no se han alcanzado todas las metas deseadas.

### Certification – the magic bullet?

Alongside statutory regulation and financial incentives for sustainable forest use, certification is viewed as one of the most effective ways of curbing unregulated logging. There are currently more than 50 certification programmes operating in different countries, the majority of them governed by one of the two main umbrella organisations, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). The area of certified forests covered by these two organisations has risen from 12 million hectares in 1998 to more than 360 million hectares in 2010, with PEFC accounting for around 231 million hectares and FSC for around 134 million hectares of the total.

#### ■ Why certification?

Since the 1970s there have been a number of attempts to halt the rapid loss of valuable tropical forests, for example through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, also known as the Washington Convention), which entered into force in 1975, and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), established in 1986. Lack of progress led in the 1980s to calls for a boycott of tropical timber products, but this was unsuccessful, especially when it became clear that a boycott would deprive timber-rich tropical countries of an important source of foreign currency, thereby hindering economic development and poverty reduction. In view of this, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was set up in 1993 – a year after the Earth Summit in

Rio – as a non-governmental organisation whose aim is to promote environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically sustainable forest use. It is supported by environmental organisations, trade unions, associations of indigenous peoples and the forestry and timber industry and is represented in more than 50 countries around the world.

#### ■ FSC: Ten principles

To be awarded the FSC label, the “good forest management” of forest businesses must be verified by an independent certification body which assesses compliance with the ten FSC principles and 56 criteria. The ten principles include the legal certainty of land-use rights, respect for the rights of indigenous peoples, observance of workers’ rights in compliance with International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, equitable use and sharing of benefits from the forest, reduction of the environmental impact of logging activities and maintenance of high conservation value forests. The tenth principle refers to plantations (whose certification some environmental NGOs reject out of hand). These are to be managed in accordance with the other requirements and help to reduce the pressures on and promote the restoration and conservation of natural forests.

#### ■ PEFC: The voice of the timber industry

In 1999, forest owners and representatives of the timber industry in six European countries who were dissatisfied with the powerful influence of environmental organisations in the FSC and the costs of the audits required set up the Pan European Forest Certification System, which in 2003 became the international Programme for the Endorse-

ment of Forest Certification (PEFC). This enables forest owners in a particular region to reduce their costs by applying for joint certification. PEFC permits environmental and social organisations to be involved, but they cannot outvote the representatives of the forest owners and the timber industry. National certification systems can apply to be accredited by PEFC; schemes thus accredited include the Sustainable Forest Initiative (SFI; USA), Cerflor (Brazil), MTCC (Malaysia) and the Australian Forest Standard (AFS).

#### ■ Weaknesses

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, eight percent of forest land worldwide is certified, the majority of it in the industrialised countries. Thus in 2007 around 50 percent of European and 34 percent of North American forests were certified, but in Latin America the figure was only one percent, in Africa 0.4 percent and in Asia 0.3 percent. Reasons given for not obtaining certification include the costs involved – especially for small forest owners – and the lack of a price premium for certified forest products in the marketplace. In Switzerland, for example, more than half of the country’s forests are certified, but a survey of forestry businesses in 2009 revealed that only 13 percent of them are able to command a premium for certified wood. The awarding practices of the two umbrella organisations also come under criticism. For example, environmental organisations complain that the PEFC system is based not on advance monitoring but only on later sampling (which reduces the costs), that the timber industry has undue influence and that too little attention is paid to social considerations. The FSC is accused of having awarded its label to companies that convert primary forest into plantations and use hazardous pesticides. There have also been reports of certified companies using illegal logging practices and abusing the rights of indigenous peoples. In some cases this has led to withdrawal of certification. (sri)



Photo: laif

*The majority of NGOs view the FSC label as the only credible forest certification scheme.*

For more information see:  
[www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org); [www.pefc.org](http://www.pefc.org)