

First steps on the road to REDD+?

Comment on the editorial: “On the road to REDD+” Nature, vol 462, 11 November 5 2009

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v462/n7269/full/462011a.html>

As highlighted in “On the road to REDD+”, REDD+ could be a key player in international efforts to lower carbon emissions. It has support from many countries as a promising instrument to curb the alarmingly high global rates of loss of rainforest. As the editorial identifies, a salient issue is effective implementation of national REDD policies when many countries face governance issues as regards policy design and lack of enforcement. But the more intractable question is whether the exogenous commercial demand for the goods (agricultural products, timber, cattle, biofuels) which drives tropical deforestation can be stemmed. REDD+ counter-measures will impact all citizens in increased prices of forest products, future food supplies, and employment, and furthermore are bound to be contested by the powerful political forces which control logging, ranching, plantations and agricultural expansion in rainforests.

Considering these realities, it may be premature and idealistic to expect deforestation of valuable rainforests to be significantly reversed under REDD+ in the short term. However, the politics and economics of emissions from degradation (thinning out of forest, rather than clearance) in the world’s dry forests and savanna woodlands may be easier to deal with. This type of degradation results primarily from gradual over-exploitation of forest by local communities as part of their livelihood strategies, and has been successfully tackled in e.g. Nepal, India, Tanzania, in programmes which specifically promote community forest management. Less consideration is being given to this dry forest degradation option in the REDD debates, partly because dry forests do not have the same iconic status internationally as the majestic Amazonian and Congo forests. Although their carbon content is much lower per hectare than that of the rainforest, they are much more densely settled, meaning that the carbon losses are very widespread, and because their commercial value is lower, their use is much less contested by powerful national actors or stimulated by external markets.

REDD might therefore do better by first focussing on dry forests and strengthening the rights of local communities in tenure and managing forest. Accounting the carbon savings would require more robust estimates of local dry forest degradation rates (virtually unknown at present), and developing ways of monitoring the gradual increase in carbon stock that results from community forest management. This would imply a community-based approach to data gathering which might in itself increase the benefits of an international REDD+ agreement to local communities.

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