

## Conservation, climate and carbon

The assault on tribal land nowadays is not confined to stealing it for colonization, farming or mining: with tragic irony, it is increasingly taken for conservation zones. Since the national park movement began in nineteenth century United States, many of its protagonists have thought parks incompatible with any human presence – apart, that is, from conservationists themselves and their retinues. This desperation for ‘wilderness’ ignores the fact that most of the areas chosen actually owe their physical appearance to millennia of human habitation anyway; but what is far worse is that it has resulted in the enforced eviction of many tribal peoples all over the world. Indeed, this variant of land theft is rapidly emerging as one of the biggest problems confronting indigenous peoples. This is not new: many very touristic parks, such as Yosemite in the United States and Tsavo in Kenya, involved the destruction of the resident indigenous peoples, and the problem is now growing more acute as conservationists press harder for governments to set aside ‘natural’ areas, which in reality have been lived on for generations.

In recent decades, other new forms of ‘development’ have become a scourge for tribal peoples, particularly in the tropics: these are biofuels, especially oil palm, sugar cane and soya bean. The fact that tropical forest is reckoned to be one of the best ways to ‘soak up’ greenhouse gas emissions has not stopped it being felled to cultivate these wasteful plants. This is underpinned by a short-term logic which declares that burning biofuels is better for the environment than fossil fuels, but which fails to factor in the loss of forest, the destruction of its inhabitants, or the increased cost of food crops which have been displaced. In most areas, the drive behind biofuels is really to do with fast profit rather than any

environmental concern. An estimated sixty million indigenous people, mainly in Southeast Asia, stand to lose out.

A theory linking rainforest destruction and global warming was advanced as long ago as the early 1970s, since when there have been numerous schemes put forward to save the forests. Most involve a flawed logic as well as someone from outside making a lot of money, or trying to. In the 1990s, one idea, called 'rainforest harvest', involved putting forest produce, such as Brazil nuts, in cosmetic and food products, and marketing them under the pretence that buyers were helping save rainforests. It was largely a gimmick of the kind known as 'greenwash'. This 'pro-environment' illusion is spreading into many destructive projects today. Malaysian Borneo's Bakun dam displaced thousands in the 1990s, including some Penan; more dams are planned, but now they are promoted in the name of countering climate change. Kenya's repeated attempts to throw the Ogiek out of their Mau Forest is now supposedly about the same thing. The 'environment' is rapidly replacing 'development' as the lie underpinning much land theft harming tribal peoples (as well as many others who also lack the money or power to stick up for themselves).

'Conservation' schemes that steal from tribal peoples – the best conservationists – might be paradoxical, but efforts to combat climate change which trample over those whose carbon emissions are largely nil is doubly so. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is going on now. An important part of the 'carbon offsetting' agenda is that governments and other authorities agree to 'reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation' (or 'REDD'). In the talks around this, the 'bigger' environmental picture is deemed too important to get sidetracked with concerns over 'minority' indigenous

rights. The result is that those rights are ignored in a way not dissimilar to how religious evangelization was once, and sometimes still is, thought to be fully justified in overriding any rights the 'primitives' might have.

REDD schemes are designed to make intact forests more valuable than felled ones. This was the same ideology behind the phoney rainforest harvest and it also prevailed during the rubber boom. In reality, increasing the value of standing forest is likely to put *more* pressure on tribal territories, lead to more land theft, and do nothing at all to safeguard the rights of the original inhabitants. Many existing 'carbon offset' schemes, for example in Africa, have harmed the indigenous peoples whose lands were involved.

Another recent 'quick fix' to exploit worldwide concern for forests, asks the public in rich countries to 'buy' a piece of rainforest, in order to save it. These fanciful claims are rarely what they seem and are fraught with problems which were clearly not thought through when they were launched. For example, some contracts try to lock local people into generations of compliance, and will simply prove unworkable. Additionally, several rainforest countries do not take kindly to swathes of land falling under foreign control and are prone periodically to nationalize outsiders' interests: the governments simply take the land back.

In general, tribal peoples are used to changing weather patterns and have survived many. It is in the coldest parts of the world that the effects of climate change are having the most impact, particularly in the Arctic where seasonal weather is no longer as predicably as it once was, so hampering Inuit hunting and fishing. The Sami reindeer are declining, as they find it harder to locate food, and the usual migrations of Siberian herders are disrupted because rivers have failed to freeze solid in recent years. Droughts in

Amazonia and the Kalahari have also proved problematic: in the rainforest, because there has been an increased incidence of forest fires; in the desert, because the Bushmen depend heavily on seasonal rain, which is no longer as predictable as it was.

Whatever the impact any changes to the world's weather might bring, and however beneficial some anti-climate change schemes may eventually be, tribal peoples are probably suffering today as much, if not more, from attempts to combat global warming as they are from climate change itself. This is a particularly tragic paradox, given that these days many would actually like to help both indigenous peoples in particular and the planet more generally; it is an indictment of the way such peoples are still denigrated by those who decide the world's priorities.

There may be a certain inevitability in this: national governments are unlikely to see much value in defending peoples who produce little or no money or votes. This leads to a consideration of some aspects of how governments and related sectors have responded to indigenous and tribal peoples.