

tong tana

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Photo: Global Canopy Programme

Protecting the climate means protecting the tropical forests

Protection of the forests must have top priority in climate policies

«If we lose the forests, we lose the fight against climate change.» Andrew Mitchell, head of the Global Canopy Programme with headquarters in Oxford, has sounded the alarm. The alliance of 29 institutions from 19 countries that he heads studies the forest canopy, where the gas metabolism of trees that is important for the climate is taking place. Now Mitchell is calling upon governments and politicians to give the highest priority in their climate policies to the protection of the tropical forests.

Christian Körner, professor for botany at Basel University, is the Swiss representative in this global alliance of scientists. For more than 15 years, he has been investigating the connection between vegetation and the CO₂ content of the atmosphere, amongst other things with the help of a 45 meter high crane that he erected in the forest in order to observe the canopy. When it comes to the importance of the forests for climate protection, Körner is very clear: «90 percent of the bio mass of carbon dioxide in the biosphere is stored in the forests. For that reason alone, the protection of the forests must have a paramount role in climate policy.»

Tropical forest burning in Brazil: The destruction of forests is responsible for one fifth of all the CO₂ emitted worldwide - more than all the emissions caused by the transport sector.



The rainforest canopy is the habitat of up to 40% of all known living species throughout the world.

Tropical forests as a natural air conditioning system

The facts published by scientists regarding the importance of forests for the protection of the climate are impressive. Forests are not only important storehouses for carbon dioxide but also function as natural air conditioning systems that regulate the global water and temperature systems. In addition, they stabilise the earth's layer of soil that contains a large amount of carbon dioxide as well. The rapid disappearance of the forest surface is responsible for about one fifth of the worldwide CO₂ emissions, more than all of the emissions in the transport sector. The largest and least expensive potential for reducing carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere is by protecting the forests.

Tropical rainforests are of special significance for the climate because their crowns provide a home for as much as forty percent of all the world's known living creatures and organisms. If they are destroyed, an enormous amount of greenhouse gases will reach the atmosphere. In a very short time, Indonesia has become responsible for the third largest amount of greenhouse emissions, 85% of which has been caused by the clearing of timber in the rainforest. In Brazil, as well, deforestation has caused 70% of all emissions detrimental to the climate.

Bio fuel as a new threat to the forests

Bio fuels, of all things, that are being propagated for climate protection, are now looming as the new threat to the tropical forests. With the new sales possibilities for palm oil as a component of bio diesel, a virtual boom in palm oil is erupting in Southeast Asia. The burning off of large forest areas for the new oil palm plantations has been regularly obscuring the skies above Sumatra, Borneo and the Malaysian peninsula with thick smoke.

In South America the expansion of soya crops is playing a similarly destructive role. In terms of greenhouse emissions, bio diesel from Brazilian soya is even worse than the conventional petrol and diesel fuels. This is shown by a new study of the Swiss

Federal Institute for Materials, Science and Technology, EMPA. Leading scientists fear that the increasing use of bio fuels could mean the deathblow for many tropical forests if counter measures are not taken rapidly.

Protection of the forests must be rewarded

An effective protection of the tropical forests is illusionary if there are not financial incentives for preserving it. The lack of specific appreciation for protecting the forests is a serious defect of the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. Instead of this, reforestation is taken into account as some sort of consolation. Its effect becomes apparent only after a long period of time. According to Christian Körner, "The talk of reforestation is certainly nice, and ecologically very desirable, but a cleared tropical forest only reaches its previous storage capacity for carbon dioxide in 200 years. The greatest effect would come from preserving the forest."

A viable political policy will be called for when politicians from all countries discuss the successor to the expiring Kyoto Protocol at the Global Climate Summit in Bali in December. A post-Kyoto roadmap must be elaborated quickly, and one that offers especially the poorer countries a substantial financial incentive for protecting their forests. And the wealthy countries like Switzerland must commit themselves to providing significant means for the protection of the tropical forests.

Lukas Straumann

Sources and further information:

Global Canopy Programme: www.globalcanopy.org/vivocarbon

UNO-Klimabericht 2007: www.ipcc.ch

EMPA-Studie zur Ökobilanz von Biotreibstoffen:

<http://www.empa.ch/plugin/template/empa/3/60112/—/l=1>

Amerindians of Guyana force loggers to retreat – with the help of the Bruno Manser Fonds

Good news has reached us from Akawini, an Amerindian village in Guyana. Thanks to the help of the Bruno Manser Fonds, it was possible for the 800 villagers to force the Samling Timber company to withdraw from their rainforest. After a meeting with representatives of the media in Akawini, the head of the local Samling subsidiary Barama gave notice to all bulldozers to withdraw from the Indian's forest.

The Malaysian company Samling, that has been supported by Credit Suisse and HSBC, was illegally logging timber in Akawini and polluting the drinking water supply. As a result of the latter, a typhus epidemic broke out in the village. An NGO alliance, coordinated by the Bruno Manser Fonds, described the case at a press conference in Zurich last May.

Toshao David Wilson, headman of Akawini, and his villagers are pleased: «I am grateful to the Bruno Manser Fonds for the possibility of coming to Switzerland and making our problem known to the public. Without international help, we could never have achieved this success.» Now the Akawini villagers are planning to take additional steps against Samling, including a claim for compensation for its unlawful operations.

The canoe is the traditional means of transport of the Indians in Guyana, South America.

Only Credit Suisse refuses to admit that it made a mistake by supporting the Samling's initial public offer on the Hong Kong stock exchange (see Tong Tana April 2007). The last letter in this regard from the Bruno Manser Fonds to the bank was still not answered at the time of going to press.



The children of Akawini can start laughing again now. Thanks to the help of the Bruno Manser Fund, the Samling timber group has withdrawn from its illegal operation in their forest.



News in brief

Success for mapping project: Penan submit a new land rights claim

The Penan community of Long Lamai on the Balong River close to the border between Sarawak and Indonesia submitted a land rights claim against the government of Sarawak and Samling, the Malaysian timber company, on 13 April 2007. Five plaintiffs led by headman Belare Jabu are processing in the name of all of the village inhabitants against the exploitation of some 200 square kilometres of rain forest. Submission of the claim, after many years of preparation, was made possible on the basis of the mapping of the communal territory. It is part of the Community Mapping Project of the Bruno Manser Fonds and financed by the Basel Kunst für den Tropenwald Foundation. Long Lamai, with its 400 inhabitants, is one of the oldest Penan villages. The nomads who roamed the area had already established themselves in their present area of settlement in 1955 at the suggestion of the former British colonial administration. The judicial process is necessary because Sarawak's government does not recognize any Penan land rights and has leased their forests to logging companies without consulting the indigenous people. There is a good possibility that the claim will only be decided in the last instance by the Malaysian Federal Court. The Bruno Manser Fonds will support the Penan claimants in this court case as part of its long-term commitment to Sarawak and will continue to report on developments.



1200 signatures for the Credit Suisse campaign newspaper advertisement

In spite of the very short deadline of only a few days, 1200 friends of the Bruno Manser Fonds signed the ad with its proclamation addressed to Credit Suisse (CS). It demanded that the new CEO, Brady Dougan, reimburse the profit from Samling's initial offer on the stock market – about 10 million US dollars – to the indigenous people in the rainforest who have become the victims of it. The same demand was voiced at a media conference in Zurich by the Bruno Manser Fonds, the Society for Threatened People and an indigenous delegation from Malaysia and Guyana (see Report and the Press Documentation under www.bmf.ch/de/news). The full-page ads appeared on 4 May 2007 in the Basler Zeitung, Zurich's Tagesanzeiger, the Berner Zeitung and the Bund as well as in the Zurich weekly newspaper.

Positive trends in Swiss communities.

604 Swiss communities have officially stated that they are favouring the forests. How do they implement the principles of sustainability in their purchasing of wood and paper products? The Bruno Manser Fonds wanted to find out. Although a survey conducted in connection with a campaign known as urwaldfreundlich.ch has indicated that the communities are increasingly introducing binding guidelines, there is still need for improvement in applying the guidelines in practice.

Results of the survey can be found under: www/urwaldfreundlich.ch



An international NGO delegation spoke to Credit Suisse shareholders at their annual meeting about the controversial listing of Samling, the tropical timber company, on the Hong Kong stock exchange. While CS Management played it down, the shareholders applauded the Bruno Manser Fonds.

Impressum

Tong Tana means «in the forest» in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia)

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