

Environmental goals affect local population

Striving after environmental goals is noble, but sometimes has unintentional side effects that harm the local population in the Third World.

By Jonathan Witteman

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Similar to how Christians in earlier centuries bought indulgences for redemption of sins, the climate problem has created its own – occasionally dubious – forms of indulgences. Under the guise of CO2 capture, bio fuels, conservation of bio diversity or eco tourism, companies, citizens and states hope to compensate for environmental damage. But the good works of the climate Samaritan often have less beneficial consequences.

'*Green grabbing*' is the term anthropologist Melissa Leach of the University of Sussex uses, on Monday during a symposium about land grabbing at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Under *green grabbing* or 'green land grabbing', Leach understands the annexation of land and natural resources in pursuit of environmental goals. Too often, says Leach, green projects in the Third World are undertaken at the expense of the local inhabitants. Their rights are infringed, they have no say in the sale of land they have often occupied for generations and they don't profit from the proceeds.

As example Leach cites the production of bio fuels like jatropha, bioethanol and palm oil for which local farmers in countries like Uganda and Indonesia are being driven off their land. But environmental protection is sometimes also at odds with human rights. For example in Tanzania where farmers, nomads and fishermen in some places no longer have access to nature and coastal reserves because they endanger the conservation of flora and fauna. These restrictions don't apply to Western safari tourists.

Eco tourists are also often deceived, says Leach. In an edition of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* specially devoted to green land grabbing, Diane Ojeda describes the case of the Tayrona National Park in Columbia. Under the green pretext that this paradise needs to be protected, the park has been privatized. The farmers and fishermen who lived there have been criminalized as trespassers or illegal occupants. Partly as a result, Tayrona has grown to become an attraction for sustainable holidaymakers who wish to venture off the track beaten by mass tourism.

Leach signals an ominous switch in western thinking about nature. During the twentieth century, she says, the basic assumption was: what can nature offer us? This attitude has made way for what Leach calls an '*economy of repair*': 'The idea that non-sustainable use of nature here can be repaired by sustainable use elsewhere'. 'Here' is often in the West, or in emerging industrial countries like China, 'elsewhere' is usually the Third World. Selling nature to save it, is how Leach sums up this paradox.

The green economy has bizarre aspects says Leach. She quotes the trade in emission rights (otherwise known as 'carbon credits') which allow companies to compensate their CO2 emission. In the forest reserves of Sierra Leone, forest rangers were promised vast sums of money to simply keep doing what they were already doing, namely protecting millennium-old forests. A company signed a contract with the Sierra Leonean government for access to the reservation, with the hope of transforming these 'clean' forests into money trees by selling emission rights to western companies. To Leach's relief, the contract was annulled after a half year, because the project failed to take off.

Speculation

It seems like speculation to stick a price tag on the forests that existed and were being conserved by the local inhabitants before money had been invented. But it fits within a trend that Leach calls the 'privatization of nature'. Suddenly one of the last things that was still free falls within reach of money.

An argument in favour of western and Chinese investments in nature and agriculture in Africa, is that the local population lacks money, technical means and expertise to develop the country. Leach: 'As justification it's said: the local people are incompetent, they're destroying nature. It's not complete nonsense that foreign companies can sometimes work more efficiently, but on the other hand, there's also lots of evidence that especially local farmers are effective protectors of the land they have been cultivating for generations.'

But is it therefore impossible to arrange a marriage between green investments in the Third World while respecting local rights? Leach: 'That's only possible if local inhabitants are actually heard and involved in the consultation process. Now the village chief is often the only one who gets to vote, and he is frequently swayed by money. The realization of projects must occur in a more transparent way. More opportunity must be given to local initiatives and more use made of local know-how.'

'But above all, we have to abandon the idea that damage to the environment in one part of the world can be compensated in another part of the world. Relocating the climate problem is not the same as solving it.'