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PNG seeks forest carbon credit

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Rainforest protection should be added to measures to prevent global warming, a seminar of climate experts from more than 150 countries has heard in Bonn.

Legal and illegal logging is putting pressure on Asia's rainforest

The proposal, from Papua New Guinea, could open the way to a major expansion of the attempts to limit climate change.

The German meeting, organised by the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is the first international attempt to look into what to do when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012.

Plush red armchairs on the podium, for TV-style question and answer sessions after each clutch of presentations, underline the deliberately informal style of discussions here.

It is all part of the effort to avoid the diplomatic rancour that usually seems to afflict such get-togethers.

It's all carbon

The forestry proposal from Papua New Guinea (PNG) ran counter to the pattern of most of the discussions.

While other developing countries rejected any spreading of responsibilities beyond the industrialised countries already signed up to the Kyoto Protocol - "you caused the problem, so you show us how to fix it first" being the essence of the argument - Papua New Guinea actively welcomed the chance to be held accountable for greenhouse gas emissions attributable to the destruction of its rainforest.

Its position comes down, in part, to the success of the carbon emissions trading scheme launched in Europe earlier this year.

A tonne of carbon saved from the atmosphere now comes with a price tag - and Papua New Guinea argues that its rainforest carbon is as good as any coal or oil burnt in the West.

"A tonne is a tonne is a tonne," declared the PNG ambassador to the UN. But at the moment, there is no way developing countries can trade avoided rainforest destruction on the international market.

Old paths

The role of forests in moderating climate change has long been recognised.

Trees absorb some of the carbon dioxide that causes global warming; and cutting them down removes that benefit.

What is more, the burned wood and degraded land left behind becomes a source of additional greenhouse gases.

In the past, however, the complexity of quantifying the amount of rainforest destruction, let alone any change in the rate of destruction, led to the issue being sidelined under the Kyoto Protocol.

There may be reluctance to re-open an issue that has been extensively debated in the past. But the Papuans say the response has been strong, and they believe many other rainforest countries are interested in the scheme.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

* Island has world's third largest rainforest, after Amazonia and Congo
* Rainforest currently under pressure from large-scale logging
* Believes forested nations should enter world carbon market
* Wants to earn market credit for reducing forest destruction

'Fair and equitable'

It has been estimated that perhaps a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions can be attributed to the destruction of rainforest; and that if aims to limit global warming to 2C (the European target) are to succeed, forestry has to be included in the discussion, PNG believes.

We want to save our rainforest, runs the PNG argument, but you have to help us pay for it.

And they do not want to wait until 2012 - "there won't be any rainforest left to save if we do," they say.

"Kyoto does not allow developing nations that reduce deforestation emissions to get credit. Kyoto unfairly discriminates against rainforested developing nations who seek to participate within the world carbon market," ambassador Robert Aisi told the meeting.

"Tropical rainforest nations deserve to be treated equally. If we reduce our deforestation, we should be compensated for these reductions, as are industrial countries.

"The compensation we seek is access to the world's carbon markets, but on a fair and equitable basis."