

Report urges rethink on value of forest resources

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25 May 2006

Source: SciDev.Net

Results from the largest ever survey of tropical forests, released today (25 May), will be seen by many as bad news for biodiversity. But they could give fresh impetus to a campaign to put forest protection firmly on the global climate change agenda.

The International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) report says 95 per cent of tropical forests are unprotected or not being managed sustainably.

ITTO's executive director, Manoel Sobral Filho, says this demonstrates "a collective failure to understand that forests can generate considerable economic value without being destroyed".

Of 353 million hectares of forest earmarked by governments for sustainable timber production, only 25 million are actually being managed sustainably, says the report.

It adds that governments have enacted management plans for only 2.4 per cent of the 461 million hectares of forest that are supposedly protected.

The report urges the international community to create incentives for tropical nations to protect their forests.

According to Sobral: "This would include a global market where prices for timber from natural tropical forests are strong, and globally important forest services, such as water production, biodiversity conservation and carbon storage are paid for."

This recommendation should be welcomed by the coalition of 15 nations (led by Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea) that last year called for more emphasis on rainforests in climate change policy (see [Compensation to save forests 'will curb climate change'](#)).

Trees contain and absorb vast quantities of atmospheric carbon dioxide — the main



Wood certified for export, Pokola, Northern Congo

greenhouse gas. The Coalition for Rainforest Nations wants international carbon trading schemes to include payments to countries that preserve their forests.

Last week, the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation, a scientific society with 1,200 members in 70 countries, officially endorsed the call.

"Financial incentives, such as carbon credits, could change the flawed economic logic that is currently driving rapid forest destruction," says the Association's president, William Laurance, who is based at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama.

"The big challenge ahead is to get industrial and developing nations to agree on a viable system to use carbon funds for forest conservation, before it is too late," he told SciDev.Net.

On a more positive note, the ITTO report says that sustainable management of forests is on the rise.

When the organisation last conducted a major survey, in 1988, only a million hectares of tropical forest were being managed sustainably. This has risen to 36 million hectares — an area about the size of Germany.