



People, Forests, and Climate Change

How will efforts to deal with climate change impact the forests of the Asia-Pacific region and the people who most depend on them? This is the first part in a series of media briefs produced to help regional journalists navigate what could become one of the great stories of our time.

Forests in Asia-Pacific are under threat. That's not a new story, though it becomes more important with every lost hectare and every family denied their means of survival. The big new question that journalists should be asking themselves, and their sources, is what climate change means for the forests of the region and the people who depend on them. Will a global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by deforestation and forest degradation – known as REDD+ – be a boon or a bust for forests and people?

This media brief provides an overview of REDD+ and things to watch as efforts to protect forests in the name of carbon gather momentum and the money starts to flow.



Why should journalists cover forests and climate?

- Tropical Asia is collectively a “**biodiversity superpower**,” possessing vast natural capital crucial for the well-being of future generations.
- About 3.7 million hectares of natural **forests are destroyed every year** in the Asia Pacific,* risking the stability of ecosystems, communities, economies and the planet’s fundamental capacity to support life.
- Tropical forest destruction frequently involves **conflict between people**, often violent conflict.
- Forests have a critical role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and **stabilizing the climate**. It is estimated that forest destruction results in global CO₂ emissions equal to the transport sector, or about 17 percent of total emissions.
- Ongoing international climate change negotiations have so far not produced the results that scientists and many policy makers argue are necessary to help prevent catastrophic changes in the global climate. But efforts to reach agreement on the role of forests in addressing climate change are moving ahead much faster than other facets of the talks. This effort, known as “**REDD+**” is currently **leading the way in UN climate deliberations**.
- REDD+ (which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is still a work in progress, and the future **impact of REDD+** on conflict, environment, and poverty could be either positive or negative. What emerges will be one of the **biggest stories** of our time.
- The **450 million people living in and around Asia-Pacific forests** have a stake in the success of REDD+. The extent to which they have a voice and a say in REDD+ will determine its success.

* For forest data, see the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) *State of the World's Forests (2009)* and *Global Forest Resources Assessment (2010)*



WHAT IS REDD+ AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR PEOPLE AND FORESTS?

A global initiative on REDD+ to protect forests as carbon pools might be the most encouraging outcome to emerge from this December's climate conference in Cancun, Mexico, the successor to last year's controversial talks in Copenhagen. If REDD+ happens, **a new global business of carbon conservation in forests could soon be worth tens of billions of dollars a year.**

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) is a mechanism designed to pay poor countries to protect their forests and reduce emissions of greenhouse gas pollutants, especially CO₂. Wealthy countries could buy carbon credits, or "offsets," from developing countries who keep their forests standing, so that net emissions on a global scale are reduced. Alternatively, REDD+ could be separate from the carbon credit market, so that wealthy countries would have to meet REDD+ commitments *as well as* their own emission reductions.

REDD+ is a way to compensate people who manage forests better, but in doing so it takes away some short-term economic benefits. It can help staunch the loss of forests and enhance their capacity to capture and store carbon. Forests lose this ability when they are 1) removed completely through deforestation (the first D in REDD+); or 2) damaged by human activity (the second D stands for "degradation"). When forests are unable to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere, the Earth loses some of its capacity to maintain safe atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases. The rapid loss of forests, especially tropical forests – 200 million hectares since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 – effectively counts for 17 percent of total global emissions every year because less forest means less carbon is absorbed.

What does the "+" stand for? The "plus" takes the mechanism to another level. It enhances the land's capacity for carbon storage by rewarding activities that improve forest health. Not only are carbon stocks protected by avoiding forest damage or outright clearing, and they are also increased by measures such as better forest management, conservation, restoration and afforestation. REDD+ is also concerned with much more than carbon, and could improve biodiversity, water quality, and other vital environmental services. And it could help ensure livelihood security and strong, clear rights for local communities and indigenous peoples. Like the rest of UN climate negotiations, everything about this issue is still in play and being contested. Whether REDD+ is a boon for forests and people – or a bust – depends on what happens over the next several years.





THE STATE OF REDD+ IN UN CLIMATE TALKS

The Copenhagen round of UN climate talks in December 2009 exposed deep fissures between countries over how to deal with human-caused climate change.

The big polluters – old ones like the United States and new ones like China – are divided over what should be done to reduce greenhouse gas pollution, how it should be done, and who should pay for it. The Copenhagen talks ended chaotically, with what many observers consider to be a weak document that did not include any binding political commitments many believe are needed to avoid severe climate change.

Small and vulnerable states were upset with the lack of commitment by big polluting countries to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels that cause global climate change. The old polluters called on emerging polluters to do more to limit their own emissions, but they were largely rebuffed. The emerging polluters, for their part, pledged action that depends on more money and technology from the rich countries, which has been slow to come. One thing that media coverage of Copenhagen has done is to draw back the veil of UN cooperation to expose the hard core of realpolitik hindering progress. A bewildering tangle of issues – economic, security, and strategic – particularly between the old and the new polluters – has littered the field ahead with obstacles.

Although a final and binding climate deal failed to materialize in Copenhagen in 2009, causing widespread disappointment and pessimism, progress on REDD+ was substantial. As with many other issues, however, this progress is ultimately tied to two key unresolved issues: 1) how much should industrialized countries do to reduce their greenhouse gas polluting, and 2) how will the financing be generated and employed. The future of REDD+ is closely tied to the future of climate negotiations.

As John O. Niles, the director of the Tropical Forest Group, put it, “REDD is the frontrunner in the twisting race to reach political agreement on climate change.” Projects to test how REDD+ might work on the ground have sprung up in Bolivia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Madagascar, and many other countries. REDD+ is being advanced in a number of international fora, as well as by NGOs and communities around the world. REDD+ has already generated billions of dollars of financial commitments from rich country governments and the private sector, although the vast majority of this is dependent on future results, i.e. carbon stored in forests, and has yet to be paid out. It is also only a fraction of the long-term investment required to make the system work.

As the Cancun climate summit nears, we can talk about the draft text for REDD+ in terms of key issues that are *likely* to be part of a final REDD+ agreement, and unresolved issues.

Progress on two key issues:

- 1) **REDD+ instead of REDD**, which means that efforts to protect and restore forests as carbon sinks will be covered.
 - ▶ Forest stakeholders will naturally have different, often competing, priorities when implementing REDD+ projects, and in some cases this could lead to conflict. As always when covering environmental issues, journalists will need to keep track of who is benefiting and who is suffering as REDD+ projects unfold – who are the winners and losers. Journalists are always taught to “follow the money” and that remains the case here.



2) **Environmental and social safeguards are now explicit in the negotiation text.**

These include:

- Safeguards to ensure that natural forests are not converted to plantations;
 - Reference to the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and
 - Full and effective participation of local people in planning and implementation
- ▶ These safeguards are fundamental to advocates for natural forests and indigenous peoples but they've been seen as obstacles to those who seek to exploit the forest. The battle over these safeguards is likely far from over; journalists can help by explaining these issues to their audiences and covering the inevitable bargaining that will happen.

Three unresolved issues to watch include:

1) **Finance and benefit sharing.** Will REDD+ be wholly or partly financed by selling carbon credits in international offset markets? Whichever way they will be generated, how will financial benefits be shared between stakeholders from national capitals to remote forest villages?

- ▶ This is a key issue for journalists. One key reason that protected areas can fail to actually protect forests is that local people are deprived of legal access to forestland, giving them little incentive to monitor or use it sustainably. REDD+ pilot programs that are underway now in countries like Cambodia, and will increasingly appear in other countries in the next several years, will provide insight into whether REDD+ will offer something different and more sustainable.

2) **Monitoring, reporting, and verification.** Significant disagreements remain about how to determine whether countries are keeping their promises to protect and restore forests.

- ▶ This could easily be controversial, with a lot of contradictory claims. The key thing for journalists here will be to get out and see the forests for themselves. This is challenging, of course; it's not easy to get the time and money from editors to cover a forest story thoroughly. Those journalists who can get out there and report from the frontlines of REDD+, however, could become leaders in their field.

3) **Speed, scale and strategy for implementation.** Should REDD+ be gradually phased in at project levels, rapidly implemented at the national level, or should there be some mixed system integrating different approaches? Many question marks remain.

- ▶ Reporters who cover issues like decentralization and power relations between the capital and upcountry should have a lot to report on as REDD+ money starts to flow and competition over access to it heats up.



The **Responsible Asia Forestry and Trade (RAFT)** Program, funded by USAID's Regional Development Mission for Asia (USAID RDMA), influences the development and implementation of the public policies and corporate practices needed to improve forest management and bring transparency to the timber trade in Asia. RAFT is managed by The Nature Conservancy and implemented with a catalytic group of NGO partners.

For more information: www.responsibleasia.org

RECOFTC's mission is to see more communities actively managing more forests in the Asia-Pacific region. During the past two decades, RECOFTC has trained more than 4,000 people from over 20 countries in devolved forest management: from national policy makers, researchers, and practitioners, right through to local forest users. Training services and learning events are complemented by on-the-ground projects, critical issue analysis, and strategic communication.

For more information: www.recoftc.org

The **Earth Journalism Network** is a project of Internews, the global media development organization, which aims to improve the quality and quantity of environmental coverage.

For more information: www.earthjournalism.org

Other briefs in this series

Digging Deeper: Decoding REDD+

Trouble in the Forests? Carbon, Conflict, and Communities

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