



Trouble in the Forests?

Carbon, Conflict, and Communities

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 third part in a series of media briefs produced to help regional journalists navigate what could become one of the great stories of our time.

A single word can describe the history of forest management in the region: conflict. Too often this happens because local people are excluded from decision-making and the benefits of forest management. REDD+ is a proposed mechanism to make forests more valuable standing than destroyed. This media brief looks at the reasons for forest conflict and how REDD+ could impact this contested terrain.

Why should journalists cover forests, climate and conflict?

- 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 involves, and leads to **serious, often violent, conflict** between people. In Asia, 75 percent of forests and tens of millions of people are affected by 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.
- A proposed UN mechanism to pay developing countries to keep forests standing and healthy, known as **REDD+**, is likely to emerge as **a major driver of change** in tropical forests. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) could pump tens of billions of dollars a year into the way tropical forests are managed. The money involved could help solve persistent problems in forest management, or it could aggravate them.
- Despite some successes of recent initiatives like forest certification, **efforts to protect tropical forests have to date largely failed**. The fate of these precious forests will be decided in just a relatively few years to come.
- One of the clearest lessons from past efforts to protect forests is that local communities and indigenous peoples were often ignored and excluded from the process. **Forests and local livelihoods have often been destroyed together** at the same time.
- **REDD+ has the potential** to impact climate change, forest health, and local wellbeing for the better. But it will require a change from business as usual to improved and inclusive forest management; otherwise it will probably fail on all counts: carbon, people, and forests.

COVERING FORESTS: MESSY BUT MEANINGFUL

Covering forests is not the preferred beat of most journalists. Forests are difficult places to access and navigate. Editors often don't give forests much attention, nor do they provide the resources necessary for journalists to pay attention to forests and what is happening to and in them. Covering a forest story is like doing investigative reporting; the deeper you dig, the more complex and sensitive the story becomes. For this reason, and others, covering forests can also be physically dangerous to the reporter. Journalists in this region have been murdered for writing about forests and corruption, offering a sober reminder of the challenges of covering forests.

On the other hand, if covered well and deeply, forest stories have a little bit of everything that captures public attention: glorious nature and catastrophic destruction, innocent victims and powerful criminals, international espionage and human drama, corruption, perseverance in the face of adversity, hope and sustainable solutions. A simple (and dry) story of forest policy, with some digging, can test the skills of seasoned reporters covering beats in every direction: politics, finance, trade, health, science, culture, law, and society. Given the stakes involved for reporters living at this pivotal moment in the history of people and forests, at a moment when the fate of our biological heritage is in serious doubt, it is imperative for us all to find the stories, convince our editors to give them play, and open the public's eyes to one of the great stories of our time.

And forest stories too often involve conflict. How REDD+ may affect forest conflict is the subject of this media brief.





CARBON, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITIES: WILL REDD+ MAKE THINGS BETTER OR WORSE IN THE FORESTS?

A global initiative to protect forests as carbon pools known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) 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. REDD+ is a mechanism to pay poor countries to protect their forests and reduce emissions of greenhouse gas pollutants, especially CO₂.

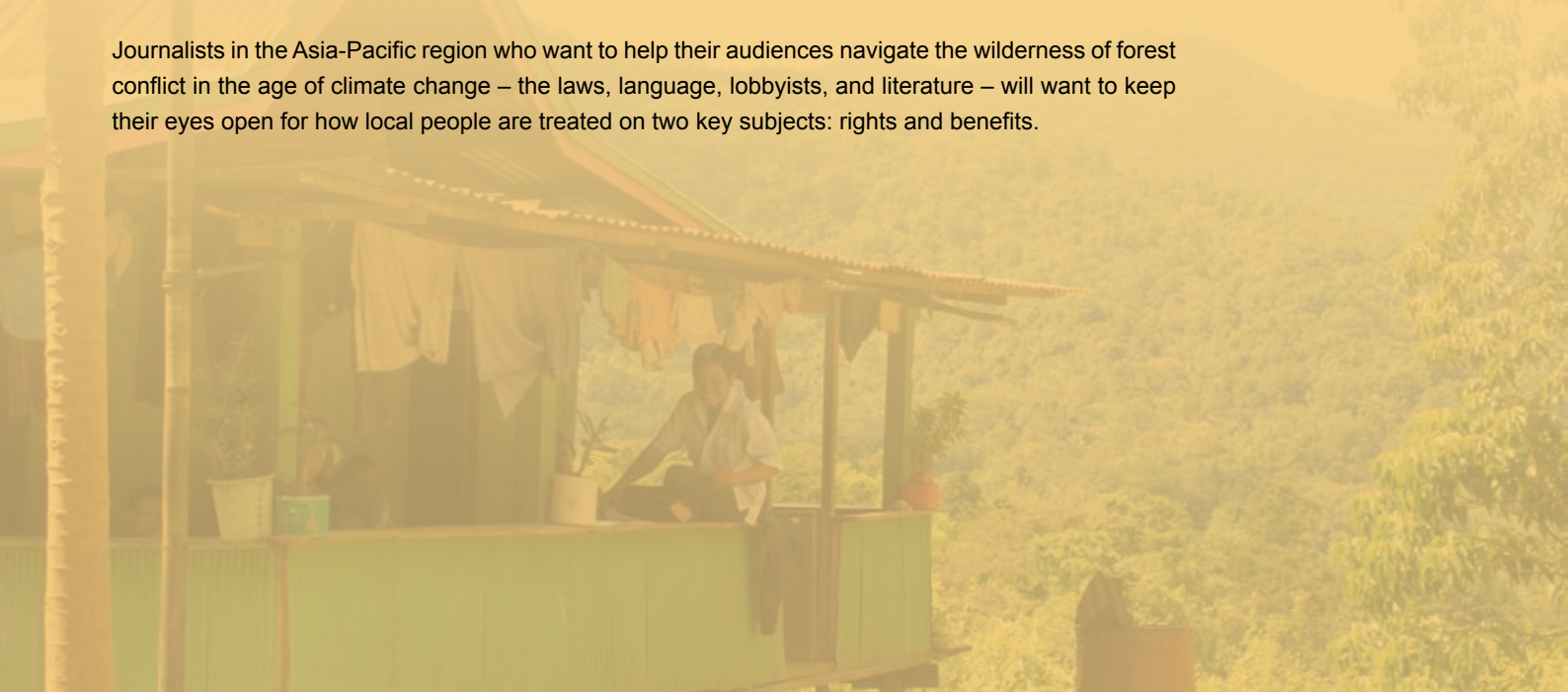
If REDD+ happens, **a new global business of carbon conservation in forests could soon be worth tens of billions of dollars a year**. Like the rest of UN climate negotiations, everything about this issue is still in play and being contested, and is ultimately tied to two key unresolved issues: 1) how much should industrialized countries do to reduce their greenhouse gas polluting and 2) how will the financing be generated and employed. These will be debated in Cancun in December. Whether REDD+ is a boon for forests and people – or a bust – depends on what happens over the next several years, at the conference tables as well as in the forests.

REDD+ AND FOREST CONFLICT

The overarching reality of forest protection in the tropics, despite some success stories, is that there is still a long way to go. One of the main reasons for this is that the people most reliant on the forests are often excluded from forest conservation and deprived by forest exploitation. Even as the lives of local people are made worse, forest management is rendered unsustainable and inadequate. It's a lose-lose-lose situation for forests, communities, and countries; aside from profits made by a few able to capture the benefits.

If REDD+ is to make a real difference, then it will have to involve much improved institutions and processes. The future of forest protection, for carbon storage and many other important services, will require a better and more honest understanding of the **causes and impacts of forest conflict**, as well as the reform and creation of institutions and processes that recognize and enhance **rights, decision-making power, and livelihoods** of forest-dependent people.

Journalists in the Asia-Pacific region who want to help their audiences navigate the wilderness of forest conflict in the age of climate change – the laws, language, lobbyists, and literature – will want to keep their eyes open for how local people are treated on two key subjects: rights and benefits.





RIGHTS

In much of the region, forest policies and practices have been synonymous with social injustice for decades. Forest management in many places continues to exclude and marginalize local people. It is not uncommon for logging operations, plantation concessions, resorts, and national parks to restrict or outright evict local people from the forests they rely on. This inevitably has led to conflict, even violence. In Cambodia in 2009, there were 236 cases of land-use conflict, 60 percent of which turned violent. In Thailand, 1.3 million hectares of protected land is disputed by local people. Without support from local communities, REDD+ will very likely fail.

Land tenure is a persistent problem, and a tricky one for journalists. Throughout the region, there are multiple answers to the seemingly simple question of “who owns the forest?” Where the right to live in and use the forest is unclear or disputed, the result is most often conflict and forest decline. A REDD+ system that does not take major strides toward resolving these longstanding tenure issues will fail to protect forests or store carbon.

BENEFITS

It has long been argued that forest-dependent people should be rewarded for wise stewardship of forests. The idea, known as Payment for Environmental Services (PES), is that if forests are rendered more valuable alive than dead, then people will work hard to keep them alive. Poachers become salaried forest wardens. Illegal loggers become employees in sustainable community-based timber operations. Free-for-all wilderness becomes a valued community forest. Downstream water users compensate upstream forest protectors. The idea is to enrich communities, not deprive them. REDD+ is like the mother of all PES schemes: the rest of the world unites to pay tropical forest countries to protect some of the most invaluable places on earth – the tropical forests. That’s the theory.

Too often, however, forest management makes poor people even poorer. In the most brutal examples, entire forests disappear and become vast tree farms, empty of both wildlife and people. But also in the name of conservation – sometimes in name *only* – local people lose their livelihoods. For the remaining forests to be saved and restored, REDD+ cannot sacrifice local livelihoods for either carbon storage or investors’ interests. Some of the money from REDD+ will need to find its way to local people, or the forest conflicts that we have known in the past will continue or even worsen.

But these benefits should also be considered “additional,” not just a financial swap for the loss of a people’s entire way of life. While REDD+ will certainly require a change in the way many local people manage their forests, these changes can open doors as well as close them. A REDD+ that delivers on increased opportunities and development assistance – for conservation farming, agroforestry, sustainable timber harvesting, ecotourism and/or forest guarding, to list a few examples – will sequester carbon and generate work. A REDD+ that fails to deliver opportunities for local people will probably fail to work on carbon, too.



WAYS FORWARD WITH REDD+ AND FORESTS

Journalists should keep a watch for the following potential solutions, things that could prevent conflict and make REDD+ succeed.

- **Consultations with local residents before decisions are made**

The key term here is Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Do local people really know what they're being consulted about, *before* any decisions are made, and do they have the right to say "no"? This concept is fundamental to the rights of indigenous peoples, and has been recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and is mentioned in the UNFCCC draft text on REDD+. A lack of consultation is a classic trigger for conflict, leading to ongoing mistrust and a lack of cooperation. People resent decisions and changes being forced on them. Of course, consultation is only a first step. It is essential to genuinely involve local people throughout decision-making processes.

- ▶ If journalists are watching and informing the public – and reminding everyone about treaty commitments and rights like FPIC – there is less chance of these rights being ignored as REDD+ projects come into play.

- **Benefits in the forest**

Failure to deliver on promised benefits – whether employment, rights, or income – is a common trigger of violent conflict. This then results in a failure to meet conservation objectives, or even sabotages them. Benefits for local people, including good jobs, have proven to be effective in recruiting local support for conservation.

- ▶ Journalists, as always, should follow the money. Does a project turn wildlife poachers into guides for birdwatchers? Or does it turn farmers into poachers? Two pilot REDD+ projects in Cambodia can offer early and encouraging insight into the potential of REDD+.

- **Clear tenure and resource management**

Disputes over who owns and should manage forests are key drivers of forest degradation. REDD+ needs to drive tenure reforms to get beyond these problems, or it could harden opposing positions.

- ▶ Journalists can get to the bottom of competing claims and separate fact from fiction, or at least shed light on the subject.

- **Community forestry to ensure local people play a key role in forest management**

In case after case, local people around the world have refused to cooperate with forest management plans because they felt threatened or excluded by outsiders. Community forestry puts local people at the center of forest decision-making and management, and in many countries has successfully reversed forest destruction and improved livelihoods. It helps ensure local people's interests are met. If REDD+ uses such approaches, conflict will be less of a problem and REDD+ is more likely to succeed.

- ▶ Journalists can assess whether authorities are taking steps to include or exclude local people in forest management. For example, in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, decades of arrests and land confiscation were largely resolved after locals were allowed by the state to jointly manage forests.



- **Government neutrality**

Local people are often exploited or threatened by powerful outsiders like timber concession operators and cannot call the police for help. Too often, the armed forces are employed to protect the forest destroyers, not the forest or local people. But when the government acts as a neutral facilitator it can reduce the potential for violence and forest destruction.

- ▶ Journalists can help remind the government about its important public servant role.

- **Better coordination between government agencies with overlapping mandates**

The need for holistic answers to complex problems runs up against the reality of bureaucratic power squabbles and overlapping authority. Sometimes no one seems to be in charge. Sometimes everyone wants to be in charge. Dumping more money on such cases is not likely to help matters. Using the money as leverage to spur real reform and integration of sectors *could* help things.

- ▶ The fact that many journalists are generalists, not specialists, gives them a certain perspective across boundaries. Using diverse lenses to analyze forest issues – economics, power, justice, ecology, etc – can help society to see how the issues are interconnected, not divided into neat bureaucratic boxes.

- **Mediation skills**

Under REDD+ billions of US dollars a year may enter forestry and related sectors, making negotiation over forests all the more important. Where there are power imbalances, for example local people on one side and influential investors on the other, negotiations are an unworkable conflict management strategy. Mediation is the more effective option. Mediation skills will need to be strengthened across the region.

- ▶ Journalists play an informal mediation role in society through balance and integrity. By talking with all sides in a conflict – and not taking any side – the media could help REDD+ reduce, not increase, conflicts over forests.

- **Integration of local livelihoods with conservation policy**

Conservation should not be separated from livelihoods. The fact that it too often has been separate – excluding local people and empowering elites – exacerbates conflict and confounds conservation. If REDD+ makes life better for people, while simultaneously storing carbon and protecting wildlife and environmental services, then it's a win all around. If forest conservation under REDD+ makes life worse for people, conflicts will intensify, and the hoped-for carbon sequestration will not materialize.

- ▶ Too often, the public accepts the stereotype of local people as lawless forest destroyers. Journalists can help correct this misperception where it exists and expose the human elements of forest stories.



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:

People, Forests, and Climate Change
Digging Deeper: Decoding REDD+

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