



Can carbon trading **save rainforests?**

Words and photography by Ian Wood

Illegal logging in the Tripa peat
swamp forest, Sumatra

Somewhere in the region of 25 million acres of tropical forests are currently being destroyed each year which equates to nearly 50 football pitches every minute. If you don't like football you can think of it as an area just short of the size of Wales being lost annually. If you don't like Wales ... well that's beyond the scope of this article.

Rainforests support an astonishing diversity of species and are vital for stabilising the climate of our planet. The idea of using carbon trading to help protect rainforests is brilliantly simple in theory. Under international agreements such as the Kyoto protocol, participating nations agree to reduce their

carbon emissions below a certain level. Nations that fail to meet their emission targets can then buy carbon credits from other countries which produce much fewer emissions. Destroying rainforests dumps huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere so the concept is to use some of this carbon money to conserve threatened areas. Potentially we are talking about billions of pounds, which has to be a good thing for conservation. Unfortunately, human beings and large sums of money are rarely a harmonious blend.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that the global forest sector accounts for 17% of manmade greenhouse emissions each year. To put

this in perspective, it is more than the emissions produced by every car and aeroplane on the planet. It is glaringly obvious that if we are to seriously tackle climate change it is urgent to reduce deforestation. With so much attention on global warming we seem to be forgetting about the other major threat to humanity. Life on earth has already experienced five mass extinctions in its four billion year history. There is now huge concern over the rate at which species of plants and animals are being lost around the world and some researchers are warning that we are on the brink of a sixth mass extinction. It would be naïve and arrogant to think that this will not have a drastic effect on human beings. About 70% of terrestrial species are found in rainforests so by conserving them we will not only reduce carbon emissions but also drastically slow the rate of extinctions.

A concept called Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) has been developed with the aim to provide the mechanism for carbon trading to conserve parts of threatened forests. The conservation group Fauna & Flora International have been at the forefront of developing projects that rely on carbon trading. The first of its kind was the Ulu Masen forest in north Sumatra. This Indonesian forest not only contains important populations of critically endangered species such as Sumatran tigers and orangutans but also millions of tonnes of carbon, all of which is threatened by illegal logging. If successful it could prevent 100 million tonnes of CO2 emissions over the next 30 years, the equivalent of 50 million flights from London to Sydney. If only the theory was that easy to put into practice.

There are a number of serious challenges that REDD needs to overcome before carbon trading schemes will start to protect areas of rainforests. Agreement still needs to be reached on exactly how a carbon trading market will be linked to emissions. The Kyoto protocol expires in 2012 and last years climate change conference in Copenhagen failed to reach agreement on the way forward from here. In the



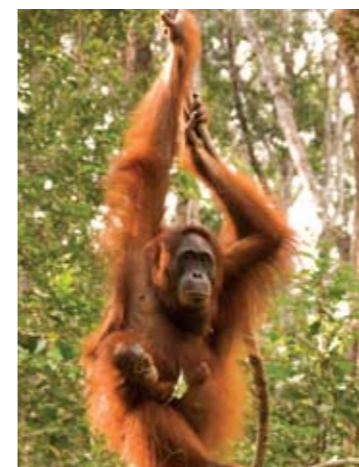
funds then this has to welcomed. We have to embrace organisations such as Fauna & Flora International and hope that their work in this field can have the effects that they think are possible. The challenges are such that it will certainly not be an immediate solution to either deforestation or carbon emission problems.

“We would envisage a slow but steady process towards a global carbon market including forests over the next 10 years. In the interim, donor supported and voluntary carbon market options should enable significant progress in REDD development and design.” said Joe Heffernan, REDD co-ordinator for Fauna & Flora International.

In developed countries we have long since destroyed most of our forests and are guzzling through fossil fuels at a ludicrous rate. We then come up with a system where we try and solve our emission problems by paying money to conserve forests that need to be protected anyway. The majority of rainforests are located in countries that have contributed very little to global warming in the first place and are occupied by people with little or no legal title to their land. Conservation rarely works if the people who live in or near the project are not consulted and included. The biggest challenge for carbon trading to protect rainforests will be to ensure that the rewards filter down to the local communities in the form of sustainable development. If we merely use them to give us an excuse to continue our excessive pollution it would be morally wrong as well as almost certainly guarantying that carbon trading will be doomed to failure. My sincere hope is that it will be a valuable tool in slowing deforestation. My darkest fear is that carbon will just become another commodity that wealthy countries trade and city dealers profit from. News of possible carbon money has long since filtered through to many countries around the world. If it never arrives, the message from the developed world will be loud and clear.



Logs waiting to be transported to a plywood factory, Borneo



Top: The head of an Indonesian village examines new deforestation near his home. Above: Borneo orangutan and baby in an area of protected forest. A Sumatran elephant



last minute deal stitched together by Barack Obama and the leaders of China, India and South Africa there was an accord which included an “immediate establishment of a mechanism for REDD”. However, without an overall climate deal it's not clear how this will work. In the short term there is more hope for the voluntary carbon market growing to a level that can provide funds for conservation projects.

There are technical issues such as working out exactly how much carbon is contained in a certain area and social challenges to ensure local communities and stake holders benefit from any schemes. There is also the messy subject known as leakage. If a carbon trading scheme is successful in protecting one part of a forest what is to stop the logging simply moving to another area?

Personally, I have very mixed feelings about whether carbon trading can actually protect some of the world's most important rainforests. But I also believe that action is better than no action. There is never enough money for conservation and if REDD can provide an increase in