

Legislative action to save the forests

While much of the discussion of climate change rightly focuses on energy consumption, the links between climate, forests and other ecosystems are many and profound.

- **As much as 20% of global carbon dioxide emissions** are coming from the destruction of forests, mostly in the tropics. This could easily get worse as some forests dry out.
- **An estimated 4% of carbon dioxide emissions** are generated by the degradation and desertification of the drylands.
- **Robust ecosystems can help to protect** against some of the effects of global warming -- mangroves protect against hurricanes, hillside forests can help to prevent floods.
- **Many ecosystems which are already under strain** from the pressure of human activities could be finished off by climate change, with disastrous consequences for both biodiversity and for the people who depend on those ecosystems.
- **The destruction of ecosystems will only add to the numbers of environmental refugees** that we can expect to see in the years to come.

In April 2008 the e-Parliament held an international parliamentary hearing in South Africa on Climate and Ecosystems. A wide range of policy ideas were examined for protecting forests, drylands and marine ecosystems. One example of "legislative best practice" which caught everyone's attention was Costa Rica's successful system of payment for ecosystem services.

By 1987, Costa Rica had gone from 85% forest cover in 1900 to 29%, and the rest was disappearing fast. Today, Costa Rica is back to 51% forest cover, a success unmatched by any other tropical forest nation. If other nations could adapt and apply the Costa Rican approach, perhaps our last great rainforests, which contain so much of the planet's carbon, could still be saved. And the same policies could be used to protect other ecosystems as well.

Essentially, Costa Rica has applied to the forest problem the same approach that Germany, Spain and other countries have applied to renewable energy by paying a good price for all renewable energy fed into the national grid. They have recognized that if we want people to do the right thing, it must be made financially attractive for them to do so.

In Costa Rica, a National Forestry Financing Fund awards to farmers and landowners Forest Certificates which have a financial value. These reward the conservation of forests over 5 years old, reforestation for sustainable timber production, agroforestry, and "assisted" natural forest regeneration. The Certificates are paying for ecosystem services provided by the forests including carbon storage, water supplies, biodiversity, scenic beauty and timber.

So far, Costa Rica has invested more than US\$120 million in payments to landowners covering half a million hectares of forest, which include 38,000 hectares of indigenous peoples' lands. Meanwhile, Costa Rica's environmental

leadership has contributed to a rapid growth in tourism, which brings in something in the order of a billion dollars a year to the national economy.

The funding for the programme has come from a variety of sources. These include a fuel tax, support from international development agencies, debt relief, and agreements with hydroelectric companies and local airlines.

The e-Parliament is planning to hold a series of international parliamentary hearings in Costa Rica itself, so that legislators from other countries around the world can see for themselves what has been achieved, question Costa Rican experts and officials, and equip themselves to propose similar programs for their own countries. As a first step, we have commissioned the World Resources Institute to produce a detailed e-Parliament Toolkit explaining the key elements in the Costa Rican policy. This can be found on our website (www.e-parl.net) in the ACT section.



Ecotourism in Costa Rica

There is much discussion in the UN climate negotiations about the need for rich nations to provide payment for ecosystem services on a global level in order to compensate tropical forest nations for keeping their forests intact. The e-Parliament, by helping countries to replicate Costa Rica's success, can help to put in place national "pipelines" for forest protection into which international funds could be injected.

The Costa Rican forest policy is yet further evidence that the climate challenge is not so much technical as political. To solve the problem, we have to mobilise the incentives and investments required to make the shift to clean energy, and to save the forests. New energy technology is always welcome, but no new technology is needed to save the planet -- the only thing we need is political will.

But where will the necessary political leadership be found? That is where the parliaments come in.