



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF FORESTS • 2011

See the forest for the trees

People who cannot see the forest for the trees are those who focus on their immediate reality so intently that they lose sight of the bigger picture.

This year we are asked to take a step back and really see the forest around us - both literally and metaphorically.

The United Nations has declared 2011 to be the **International Year of Forests**. This gives us the perfect opportunity not only to appreciate their beauty, but also to see the bigger picture and understand what an important role forests play in sustaining life on earth.

The logo for the International Year of Forests (seen above) indicates the variety of ways in which we depend on forests. Forests are home to 80% of the world's land animals and plants. Forests also support many human lives - those of people who live amongst the trees and also those who depend on the food, medicines and resources that can be found in forests.

Forests also play a key role in maintaining our climate, by storing carbon, cleaning our air and recycling rain water.

The human at the centre of the International Year of Forests logo reminds us that we depend on forests as much as any other natural being. It is also a timely reminder that forests depend on us too. It is estimated that logging (for agriculture, grazing, timber and paper products, fuel and housing) has destroyed 50% of the earth's forests.

Currently, we are still logging forests at an unsustainable rate. But with this year's international focus on forests, hopefully things are beginning to change for the better.

In this issue of Watermark, we will hear the story of CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee researcher, Frances Egan, who travelled to one of the greatest forests of all - the Amazon rainforest. We will also take a brief look at an international agreement designed to help protect forests in developing nations.

Green, blue and black gold

My name is Frances Egan and I research and write the articles that go into **Watermark**. Normally my research involves interviewing experts and reading academic papers. But last summer I was lucky enough to travel to South America and experience the beauty and importance of forests in a very personal way. I would like to share with you some of my experiences and how they have helped me to appreciate the way in which humans and forests depend on one another.



South America has so much to offer a wide-eyed traveller, from ancient ruins to snow-capped mountains to sun-drenched beaches. But one of the most enticing features of South America has to be the Amazon rainforest. It stretches five and a half million square kilometres across nine different countries, and is fed by the Amazon river, the world's largest river.

When I decided to visit the Amazon rainforest, it was hard to know where to begin. There were so many different ways to enter and regions to explore. I ultimately decided to explore the Ecuadorian Amazon.

My journey to the Amazon began in Quito, Ecuador's capital, and the second highest capital city in the world - sitting at 2800 metres above sea level. Although it was summer, Quito's location in a valley surrounded by snow-capped volcanic mountains meant that the air was cool and crisp.

In order to reach Sani Lodge, an eco-lodge nestled between the Cuyabeno Reserve and the Yasuni National Park, I needed to take an 8 hour bus ride to Coca, a small town on the Napo River, and then a 3 hour boat trip up the river to the Lodge.

As the bus sped away from Quito through the night, I could feel the air become hotter, moister and heavier. By the time I reached Coca, it was clear that I had left the mountains and entered the rainforest.

As the sun rose on Coca, the difficulties encountered by people who live in the forest became clear. I had imagined that Coca would be a small, rustic rainforest community that hosted eco-tourists on their way into the rainforest. I was surprised to discover instead that Coca is an oil town, servicing the companies and the workers who drill in the forest. The presence of this gritty industry made my journey deeper into the rainforest even more surreal.

The marks of oil companies were visible all along the banks of the Napo River, as I could spot drilling towers rising above the tree line, flames burning in the forest and trucks gliding down the river.



The main street of Coca, an oil town in the middle of the Ecuadorian rainforest.



Barges carry trucks and drilling equipment down the river.



The rainforest scarred by oil exploration.

Photos courtesy of Kent Hau.



The beautiful Sani Lodge, providing the community with a sustainable income.



Local children are given schooling thanks to the income generated by Sani Lodge.



A butterfly, just one of the millions of natural wonders supported by the forest.

Photos courtesy of Kent Hau.

After three hours travelling up the Napo River, we turned off into a winding creek sheltered by the rainforest canopy above. Finally this creek opened out onto a peaceful lagoon. At last I had reached Sani Lodge and it took my breath away!

Eco-tourism has taken off throughout the Amazon and Sani Lodge was one of many places I could have chosen to stay. The reason I chose the Lodge was because it was built and operated by the local people, and all of their profits went directly to supporting the community.

One of my guides, Olger, explained that the community used to allow oil companies to work on their land because of the large financial incentives they offered. However, they realised that the financial reward was not worth the destruction caused to their land and livelihoods. In order to free themselves from this destructive cycle, the community decided to create an eco-lodge so that they could have financial security, but not at the cost of their natural home.

Staying at the lodge and talking with the local people made me appreciate the tension between traditional ways of life and the demands of a resource-hungry world.

The Amazon was the highlight of my trip through South America. Being surrounded by the tranquil beauty of the forest and the river and witnessing the abundance of life that the forest sustains was a magical experience. But the looming presence of drilling towers and oil trucks was a reminder that the forest needs to be cared for - not just by local inhabitants, but by all of us.

Although the Ecuadorian Amazon seemed a world away from my home in Sydney, I felt a sense of responsibility for the problems being encountered in this beautiful part of the world. I couldn't help but wonder if my own demand for resources was contributing to oil companies' push into the Amazon.

While I always make an effort to walk or travel by public transport rather than drive, and to buy locally-produced food that hasn't been transported by trucks for miles to get to my plate, it can be easy to fall back into bad habits.

Seeing the beauty of the Amazon rainforest and the value it holds for the people who live in it gives me the extra motivation I need to reduce my reliance on oil and other fossil fuels.

The Amazon rainforest has been referred to as the "lungs of the world". Even though we may live far away, it is time for people all over the world to take a deep breath and see the true value of the forest and the trees.

Money growing on trees?

Efforts to halt deforestation and to encourage the regeneration of forests have been occurring for decades. Thankfully, the recent focus on climate change has boosted these efforts. Deforestation not only results in the loss of habitat for countless species, but it also accounts for almost 20% of global greenhouse gases - the biggest contributor after the energy sector.

This means that deforestation is one of the most crucial problems to address if the world is to avoid catastrophic climate change. The international community has recognised this, by creating a scheme called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD).

REDD acknowledges the value of forests in storing carbon and reflects this value by giving "carbon credits" to nations that preserve forests. These credits can then be bought by developed countries who have high emissions as a form of carbon off-set. Put simply, developing countries are given a financial incentive to protect their forests and the carbon stored within them.

REDD was developed at the 2009 United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. At the most recent conference in Cancun, Mexico the scheme was extended to include incentives for the conservation and sustainable management of forests and was named REDD+.

Encouraging conservation through an international market mechanism is potentially very effective. However, it must be acknowledged that using a carbon credit system allows the nations or industries that purchase these credits to continue polluting.

Forest preservation should be undertaken alongside other measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not in place of them. Schemes such as REDD+ also have complex ramifications for the communities who live and work in the forests that are being protected.

As the story on the previous page indicates, indigenous people who live in forests need their homes to be protected, but they can often be caught up in the struggle to balance conservation with generating income.

This dilemma is something that needs to be carefully considered by any developed nation seeking to engage in the REDD+ scheme.

Wealthy nations have a responsibility to ensure that their resource-intensive economies do not put developing nations, and their peoples into an unfair position.

While the majority of the earth's forests may be found in developing countries across Asia and South America, it is important that all of us - whether we are surrounded by trees or only pot plants - acknowledge the role we have to play in keeping forests alive and well.

Web Links

UN International Year of Forests

<http://www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011/>

WWF Forest Conservation

Read about the work of the World Wildlife Fund and see great links on how you can reduce your impact on global forests.

http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/how_we_work/conservation/forests/

Amazon Watch

Learn more and see how you can get involved in protecting the Amazon.

<http://amazonwatch.org/>

Australian Conservation Foundation

Be part of ongoing campaigns to protect Australian forests.

<http://www.acfonline.org.au/default.asp>

Sani Lodge

Learn more about how the Sani eco-lodge has helped the local community.

<http://www.sanilodge.com/pages/history.html>

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