

ESSAY

Tax Rich Nations, Save the Jungle

Tropical rain forests benefit the entire world; their protection cannot be left solely to the poor countries where they are found

Every minute 25 acres of rain forests in the tropics disappear as people in Third World countries cut and burn, often to feed themselves. But the gains they win are short-term, and the losses long. Many scientists, including Ira Rubinoff, director of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, argue that the problem is so severe it requires an unprecedented response now. In the following essay, Rubinoff offers some radical ideas on what must be done—and who must pay.

IT'S A HISTORIC day in a Third World nation: after years of politicking and painstaking research, a tropical rain forest becomes a national park. Conservationists around the world celebrate their victory in saving a priceless storehouse of plants and animals.

Five years later, poachers take the park's last surviving leopard. Or illegal loggers destroy a unique area of trees with all its associated plants and animals. Or ranchers graze cattle on the anemic soil of burned-over land.

This is the tragedy of the "paper park," caused by a serious flaw in the efforts of conservationists. In creating preserves, they fail to compensate developing nations for losing the use of resources. As a result, a developing nation's rain forests become casualties in a people's battle to improve their lives.

There is only one way out of this dilemma: the developed nations must pay the Third World for the expense of preserving its forests.

The strategy I propose involves taxing people in developed nations from 50 cents to five dollars per person each year, depending on the country's wealth. People in the United States, for example, would pay the maximum amount, contributing about a billion per year. This is equivalent to an ease of about 12 percent in U.S. development assistance programs. The fund,



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A huge infusion of cash is needed now to save the genetic diversity found in threatened jungles, argues a scientist with a bold but radical funding plan.

which would total more than \$3 billion annually, should flow through an independent institution such as the World Bank.

In return, the 48 tropical forest nations in Africa, Asia and the Americas would set up a system of 1,000 reserves averaging 247,000 acres each (their size would vary widely, of course). These nations would act as custodians of the reserves, which would be inspected annually by an international agency. Each host nation would receive an annual payment based on the area under protection—an average of \$3 million per reserve. If the country

failed to maintain the reserve, it would lose the money.

That would be the only string attached, however. Each nation would be able to use its funds as it wished, for reserve protection, agricultural intensification or industrial development, for example, so as to decrease the impact of other economic pressure upon the reserves.

To provide even more incentive, selection of the areas to be included in the reserve system would be up to the host country. This would allow governments to choose sites where there are few conflicts over development. Obviously, not all areas with the greatest natural diversity would be chosen; but if we preserved enough land, diversity would take care of itself.

The entire system would preserve about 10 percent of the Earth's remaining tropical rain forest. This does not mean that 10 percent is the ideal amount, and that the other 90 percent can be exploited or destroyed. But the proposed plan would at least establish a safety net, ensuring that a gene pool is preserved. At the same time, by saving the world's plant and animal species—two-thirds of which live in tropical rain forests—the rich nations would also help ensure their own futures; the genetic base preserved would help everyone.

The most serious argument against my plan is that it's impractical. Hard-pressed governments are unlikely to impose yet another tax on their citizens, especially to foster programs in other countries. My only answer is that no other plan has a chance of saving the world's tropical forests. Without short-term economic incentives, deforestation will continue, and we will see a wave of extinctions the likes of which we have never seen before. Yes, it is expensive medicine; but we cannot even fathom the effects of the disease.

—Ira Rubinoff