



28 November 2005 10:39

Pay up to save the rainforests

By Peter Popham

Published: 28 November 2005

A bloc of developing countries plans to make a radical proposal this week at the United Nations summit on climate change in Montreal: pay us, and we will preserve our rainforests.

The group of 10 countries, led by Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica, argues that the rest of the world is benefiting from the rainforests' natural wealth without sharing the cost. Sir Michael Somare, the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, said timber was one of the few natural resources available to the countries and their only real option for economic growth involved the destruction of the forests.

The Rainforest Coalition of countries calls that a recipe for failure - failure to preserve biodiversity, pressure to release the poorest people from poverty and failure to protect the world from the greenhouse effect.

Pointing out that the world and its climate benefits immensely from what remains of the developing world's tropical forests, but the rich countries pay nothing to ensure their safety, the Rainforest Coalition points out that: "In many forested rural areas, the only real options for economic growth involve the destruction of the natural forests."

In its natural state, the forest provides little that its unhabitants can take to market. Only by logging or burning the trees, and selling the timber, or planting the cleared ground with crops, can they increase their wealth. But the value of the tropical forest to the rest of the world is far more than just a sentiment. The forest acts as a "carbon sink", sucking up the greenhouse gases produced by the burning of fossil fuels that create the greenhouse effect. Conversely, cutting or burning the forest adds enormously to the emission of carbon dioxide, whether the trees are burnt or simply rot.

During the 1990s, according to the findings of a UN panel, 20 to 25 per cent of global carbon emissions were generated through land-use change, primarily through the degradation of forests. The amount is comparable to emissions from burning fossil fuels in the US, the single largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

Now the Rainforest Coalition is offering to put a stop to that - at a price. They want to be included in a scheme bringing the ingenuity of market mechanisms to the challenge of hauling the world back from the brink of ecological self-destruction.

Already under the Kyoto protocol, billions of dollars are changing hands annually in the form of what are called "carbon offsets". The protocol requires countries progressively to lower their gas emissions. Industrialised countries that have trouble reaching emission targets can offset their excess emissions by buying credits from countries that are doing better.

Until now, the countries of the developing world where the tropical forests are concentrated have been excluded from this scheme - as they are also excluded from the obligation to cut emissions, which apply only to the wealthy industrialised countries.

The Rainforest Coalition is now asking to be taken into the scheme. A heavily polluting country in Europe will buy carbon credits from developing countries that can prove - and there are two independent boards that will verify it - that they have managed to keep their "carbon sinks" intact. That way, for the first time, the developing countries will have a powerful financial incentive for doing what the rest of the world has been urging them to do for decades: control the logging.

"The objective," said Sir Michael Somare "is to align the interests of rainforested developing nations with industrial nations - with the latter offering markets for carbon off-sets and forest products. Sir Michael said: "If we, the rainforested nations, reduce our greenhouse

gas emissions, we should be compensated for these reductions, as are industrialised nations.

"It's that simple."

The American economist Joseph Stiglitz, has given the proposal a warm endorsement. "Developing countries have long provided a vital global public good: maintaining global environmental assets," he said. "Their rainforests are a vast storehouse of biodiversity, and forests are major carbon sinks, reducing the level of CO2 in the atmosphere."

The next obvious opportunity for changing the Kyoto protocol to bring the rainforest countries on board is 2012. But Papua New Guinea and others in the coalition argue the change needs to happen now - and there is nothing to stop it happening.

© 2005 Independent News and Media Limited