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Greenpeace - New Campaign To Slow Down Amazon Rainforest Destruction

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June 1, 1999 Washington, D. C. This week, Greenpeace has launched a worldwide campaign against loggers who are cutting down ancient forests illegally, especially Brazil's Amazon rainforest. Greenpeace Executive Director, Thilo Bode, announced in Rio de Janeiro on May 31st that "this is the most important campaign and also the largest. If we are successful, we can do something very important for the planet. It is certainly the most difficult campaign we have ever had." Bode pointed out that 70% of the Amazon's deforestation is caused by loggers - and most of them have no legal right to cut the trees down. Another fact is that half a dozen large corporations in Europe, Asia and the United States control more than 12% of the Amazon's timber-processing capacity and about half of the export value.

Once upon a time in the 1960's, the Amazon rainforest covered about 4 million square kilometers and represented one-third of the world's remaining tropical forests still intact. But since 1970, 15% of that rainforest has been cut down. And in the last decade, the destruction rate has been 1% each year as farmers slash and burn and loggers cut for profit and ignore recent Brazilian government restrictions. Since 1995 alone, an area the size of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg combined has been deforested.

Today, I talked with Scott Paul, Forest Policy Specialist, and Head of the Forest Campaign for Greenpeace USA. I also interviewed Christoph Thies, International Coordinator for the Greenpeace Forest Campaign. The main focus of our discussion was what new campaign strategy Greenpeace now has to slow down destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

Interview:

Scott Paul, Forest Policy Specialist, Greenpeace USA, Washington, D. C.:

"We want to develop a world where the forest products that are harvested with appropriate environmental and social standards are rewarded in the market place. And that forest products that have resulted in the utter destruction of a forest that's 10,000 (years old) in some situations - and if they are turning those forest products into literally - I'm not joking - toilet paper, phone books, tooth paste and shampoos in the forms of cellulose ethers that give toothpaste and shampoos their kind of, holds them together, gives them their quality. It goes into cake mix, in some situations we have found forest products that go into ammunition filling. I don't think you should cut down an old tree to use for a product that will be used once and then disposed of.

I THINK THERE ALSO IS A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION: DO WE WANT TO BE CUTTING DOWN ANY OF THESE ANCIENT FORESTS AT ALL?

Our position - the World Resources Institute has estimated that approximately 20% of the earth's original ancient forests remain in large enough chunks that

they can support their normal range of animals and species that live there.

ONLY 20%.

Only 20% of the earth's original forests remain in chunks large enough to support these populations. There are forests all over the place, but largely, they are secondary forests and secondary forests cannot be home to the large, vast majority of biodiversity. Sure, deer, rabbits and squirrels can live in them. But when you are talking about wolves and bears and moose and different fungus, the whole, insects - you need a mature forest to house all that. So, we're trying some how to separate out the last remaining what we call ancient forests and old growth forests - essentially the same thing, although ancient is a more accurate term. We're trying to get people to distinguish between the ancient forest and all the secondary forests - they are not the same thing and cannot be treated the same. And if you want to go hammer a secondary forest to make toilet paper or phone books, I still have a problem with that, but I have a much greater problem if you're going to hammer one of the last pristine temperate rainforests on earth in order to make a phone book.

The philosophy behind the market's campaign is that Greenpeace believes consumers have the right to know whether the products they buy have come from a well-managed forest that's still there or from a devastated Brazilian rainforest. So, the right to know is the fundamental concept behind what we call the markets campaign. Instead of going to the company that is logging, we go to the company that's buying. Typically they have a household name and they are more willing to listen to us and say, "I can buy from Person A instead of Person B, easy. And if you're telling me that Person B is destroying the last Brazilian rainforest on earth, then I don't want that either."

International Greenpeace

Christoph Thies, International Coordinator, Greenpeace Forest Campaign, Amsterdam, Netherlands:

"The key question I think is to find alternatives for the Amazon people, for the people who live in the Amazon to make a living with activities which do not destroy the forest and that could be all, the whole sector of non-wood extraction like nuts and fruits or ecological fishing - there are a lot of waterways - and also the careful development of ecological tourism and possibly also some small scale activities and ecological logging will be part of the package. So, there is not one solution - the answer is there must be a diversity of solutions.

HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY CHANGE THE THINKING OF FARMERS IN THE AMAZONIAN REGION TO VALUING THE RAIN FOREST FOR THE NUTS AND THE FRUITS AND THE MEDICINES THAT THEY CAN PROVIDE INSTEAD OF BURNING THEM DOWN?

One issue is to show them there is a chance they can also make an income, make a living without either being involved in destructive logging or converting the forest into farm land.

BUT HOW DO YOU DO THAT? THAT'S MY QUESTION.

A key part is to influence the market demand. There will be an increased demand for products from the Amazon which do not lead to its destruction, and people around the world increasingly refusing products which come from the destruction of the forest.

SO HOW WILL GREENPEACE ACTUALLY EXECUTE WHAT SEEMS LIKE A GOOD IDEA? THERE'S A LONG GAP BETWEEN WORDS AND ACTUALLY PHYSICALLY GETTING SOMETHING DONE.

Well, I can't explain you in every detail now, but we will definitely use our year

long experience with the market place with the big consumers of products from the forest. And use that market force to get people to favor products which are Amazon-friendly and which do not lead to the destruction. We have a lot of contacts in Europe, the U. S. and increasingly in Japan and East Asia and a lot depends on changed market demand.

WHAT IS IT THAT THILO BODE, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GREENPEACE INTERNATIONAL, IS TRYING TO DO RIGHT NOW IN RIO DE JANEIRO?

Well, this week we have announced our project and it will be lead by Roberto Kishinami, the Executive Director of Greenpeace Brazil because this project is very much Brazil-driven and has a lot of international support. That's why Thilo Bode is there. And we have been releasing there yesterday a report on the activities of the logging industry in Brazilian Amazon selective companies. Also, we released a critique of the pilot program of the G-7 countries to help the Amazon. We still want the continuation of this program, but it has to be made more meaningful on the ground to stop deforestation and forest destruction. And last but not least, we are releasing a project which involves a new technology of rubber processing that has a chance to increase the income of rubber tappers as one example of non-wood use of the forest.

A NON-WOOD USE. AND IS THE BRAZILIAN GOVERNMENT ACTUALLY ALLIED NOW WITH GREENPEACE ON THIS EFFORT OR NOT?

Well, we have seen quite a change in the attitude of the Brazilian government. We have been welcomed and had arranged a meeting with the President of Brazil and also the Environment Minister and at least in part of the government we can see a change of attitude. Of course, we remain cautious and we don't believe everything that is written on paper or what people are telling us. We want to see the changes on the ground. But the assessment is that we see some potential for more cooperation and stronger political will also on the side of the federal government in Brazil. What remains a big problem is the government of the different Amazonian states.

THAT ARE BASICALLY ACTING COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT AND ON THEIR OWN AND ALLOWING PEOPLE TO SLASH AND BURN.

Exactly. They have still a lot of local control and they still play very much in the favor of those who are currently destroying the Amazon - namely, the logging industry, but also the mining industry and the expansion of the agriculture industry into soy bean plantations and cattle ranching.

WELL, IS THE GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL PREPARED TO TAKE FEDERAL TROOPS NOW INTO THE RAINFOREST TO STOP THE ILLEGAL BURNING?

We haven't been told any concrete steps by the federal government, but what we at least heard is that they support the ideas on a very general level and what the concrete steps will be, remains to be seen. Another important role will be with the G-7 countries. The G-7 last year in Birmingham decided to tackle illegal logging on a global scale as one of their global priorities in the field of environment and we still want to see more action from the G-7 countries.

SO IF WE COULD GET, BESIDES THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA, IF WE COULD GET OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES TO BASICALLY START REDUCING ANY TRADE WITH BRAZIL ON PRODUCTS THAT WERE AFFECTING THE RAINFORESTS, IT COULD MAKE A BIG DENT IN THE BRAZILIAN GOVERNMENT REALIZING THAT THEY CAN'T ALLOW THIS ANYMORE.

That's true. We think it needs, of course, international action. We still see as a matter of fact a very big part of all the logs - and that includes the illegal logging - ends up in G-7 countries. And if they really want to take that seriously, they have to stop importing them as a first step."

More Information:

If you want to help Greenpeace in their new campaign to slow down Amazon rainforest destruction, go to their Take Action section on their website. Or write to Scott Paul, Forest Campaign, Greenpeace USA, 1436 U St. N. W., Washington, D. C. 20009.

Websites:

www.greenpeaceusa.org

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