

COMMENTARY

Beyond Tropical Forests Adoption: Contextualizing Conservation StrategiesClaudia Romero¹

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and

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of factors driving tropical deforestation demand integrated approaches from concerned researchers and policy makers. Strict protection is sometimes the most appropriate mode of conservation, but conservation through management is often the better option. In either case, this essay highlights the importance of considering the social/cultural, economic, and political contexts in which these forests are threatened. By attempting to understand the cultural settings, institutional architectures and dynamics, and local expectations, and then by combining the concepts and tools of a range of disciplines, researchers will be more likely to forge lasting partnerships and increase their potential for sustained improvement in resource management and overall forest conservation.

Abstract in Spanish is available at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/loi/btp>

Key words: conservation; governance; tropical forests.

WE READ WITH INTEREST THE CALL FROM LAURANCE (2008) for researchers to adopt tropical forests to assure their conservation, but want to suggest an alternative perspective. In his editorial he profiles two noteworthy forest-adopting conservationists to inspire other ecologists to use a similar approach to promoting tropical forest protection. The apparent successes of these two individuals were reportedly due to their being strongly committed, motivated, and inspiring people dedicated to protecting their adopted forests. We applaud the contributions of these conservationists and endorse the general environmental message of Laurance's essay, but there are some elements of the 'adoption' approach we wish to highlight as potentially problematic. First, as ecologists from Latin America, we object to the term *adopt*, even if used in a solely metaphorical sense. Second, we are concerned about his portrayal of forest acquisition and preservation as the most viable approach to conservation, whether of logging concessions in Argentina or of privately owned land in Panama. Finally, we feel that Laurance's well-intended recommendations to researchers concerned about tropical forest conservation fail to reflect the contexts in which these forests grow. Our essay is an attempt to contribute to tropical conservation by presenting a somewhat different point of view that we hope will inspire researchers of all disciplines to more effectively combat the destruction of tropical forests.

Adoption means 'the appropriation and assumption of future care of something' (Merriam-Webster 2009), in this case a tropical forest. Perhaps we are being overly sensitive about the paternalistic tone of the word *adopt*, but our concerns grow when we reflect on

the implication that tropical forests are up for adoption. Consider the reactions of the people who live in and derive their livelihoods from a forest when they learn that it is up for adoption. The term *adoption* is also unfortunate insofar as it also implies that parenthood is lacking or inappropriate. We fear that use of this term might send the wrong message to the local, regional, and national institutions that are trying to promote tropical forest conservation by establishing protected areas, by emphasizing sustainability in laws related to resource management while at the same time striving to enforce them, and by recognizing the legal resource rights and responsibilities of forest-dependent people.

We do not want to dwell on the questionable metaphor of adoption given that one indicator of inappropriate 'parenting' of tropical forests is unabated deforestation and degradation. That said, the problem of continued high rates of forest loss in the tropics is complex and will not be solved simply by excluding people or buying resource use-rights (Chomitz *et al.* 2007).

The buy-the-forest solution to the deforestation problem might settle some short-term conservation problems, but does not address the reasons why deforestation continues even where legally forbidden. Furthermore, while land purchases provide a few people with ready cash, the benefits are not likely to be enduring and the problem will resurface elsewhere (*i.e.*, there will be 'leakage'). Unfortunately for those seeking simple solutions, enduring options will emerge only after unraveling the deforestation dilemma. For example, it helps to understand the livelihood options and hopes of the people whose forests are perceived as being up for adoption, and what might keep them from using their new-found wealth to clear forests somewhere else.

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We also worry when a proposed portfolio of conservation solutions fails to include the option of conserving forests through better management (e.g., Karsenty 2008). This option deserves attention given the 800 million people living in and around tropical forests (Chomitz *et al.* 2007). All the remaining forests in the tropics simply cannot be set aside as protected areas (Sayer *et al.* 2000). More fundamentally, we object to seeing the tropical world dichotomized into pristine protected areas and environmental wastelands. More people need to recognize the broad continuum of tropical forest management options, starting with nontimber forest product collection but also including industrial-scale reduced-impact logging. Perhaps strict protection was the only viable option for the highly fragmented forests from the examples selected in the essay, but there are certainly other conservation approaches worth considering.

Bolivia provides many examples of landscapes where conservation alternatives to adoption-for-protection are often viable. About half of the country's territory is forested (0.53 million km²), of which *ca* 26 percent is in protected areas, 6 percent is for restricted use, and 68 percent is designated as production forests. Obviously, given that the majority of the forest is zoned for production of timber and nontimber forest products, any viable conservation strategy in Bolivia cannot focus solely on protected areas. We would be the last to propose logging as a panacea for tropical forest conservation, but Bolivia does host many successful initiatives that demonstrate that a great deal of biodiversity and valuable ecosystems services are maintained in well-managed forests (Flores *et al.* 2001, Fredericksen & Fredericksen 2002, Woltmann 2003, Flores & Martinez 2007, Maldonado 2007). Even the most die-hard protectionist will admit that, at least from biodiversity and ecosystem service perspectives, even poorly managed forests are better than soybean fields, oil palm plantations, fiber farms, or cattle ranches.

We believe that researchers concerned about tropical forest conservation need to recognize the context in which these forests are found. A consequence of disregarding contexts is severe limitation on opportunities for researchers to engage with the individuals, social networks, and institutions participating in local policy processes (Spilbury & Nasi 2006). Ecologists need to be humble and recognize that their research is typically tangential to policy processes (Putz 2000). Furthermore, if we want to contribute constructively to tropical forest conservation, then we need to recognize institutional boundaries, consider what other disciplines have to offer (of which economics, cultural geography, and anthropology figure most prominently), and strategize for everlasting partnerships and enduring benefits.

Laurance's essay provides good generic advice for aspiring conservationists, but makes no mention of the particular challenges faced by researchers concerned about the fates of forests outside of their home countries, often in cultural settings that they struggle to understand. While we do not condone the 'trial by passport' that is sometimes used to undermine the efforts of outsiders and are uncomfortable with accusations of 'green colonialism', we plead for more integrated approaches that emphasize support for local institutions and individuals (Table 1). Certainly in the absence of high-level local environmental expertise, no conservation solution is

likely to endure. Consequently, we believe that conservationists need to play active and committed roles in capacity building.

We believe that more than adoption, tropical forests will benefit from imaginative collaborations that facilitate development of sustainable approaches that do not prevent locals from enjoying the values of the nature around them. Those responsible for the fates of tropical forests also need answers to management questions, which will emerge only from research that is more practical than pure, but at least equally challenging. Also needed are individuals who are able and willing to inform and otherwise participate in local initiatives to secure structural policy changes. Among the widely lamented constraints on conservation are opportunities to make everlasting good decisions for the remaining tropical forests. Finally, regardless of the pixel-size at which they are viewed, most tropical forests are used by local people and are not in the developed countries that produce most of the world's biologists.

TABLE 1. *Some additions to the 'advice for aspiring conservationists' provided by Laurance (2008).*

Understand your surroundings

- Master the local language and understand your cultural setting sufficiently to communicate effectively
- Become affiliated with a local research institution before you decide on a project to assure that your research is both feasible and locally relevant
- Get to know local researchers and environmental NGOs and develop a local network
- Try to understand how representatives of local institutions, local researchers, and other local stakeholders perceive the issues and what is at stake
- Try to comprehend the constraints on tropical forest conservation imposed by poverty and poor governance

Assist local research institutions

- Promote local empowerment
- Promote strong governance and accountability
- Assist local institutions so that they can better consider research-based recommendations
- Assist with research carried out by your host institution
- Use your academic training to promote informed dialogue on conflictive environmental issues

Capacity building

- Engage local people in your research but recognize that developing countries need qualified researchers and informed decision-makers more than able field assistants
 - Provide promising and motivated local students with encouragement and information regarding graduate programs and other training opportunities in your home country
 - Present your research results at local universities and at national meetings in whatever language is appropriate
 - Offer field research courses that reflect the complex social and natural landscapes that surround you
 - Pursue modes of information dissemination that will reach the relevant stakeholders
 - Also publish in local journals and in the language of your host country
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