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Conserving forests

Pulp friction

What is the best way to save forests?

“USE it or lose it” is an idea that is gradually penetrating the conservation movement. Its latest incarnation is a report snappily entitled “Making markets work for forest communities”, which was launched in London on March 7th. Put out by Forest Trends, an American non-governmental organisation, and the Centre for International Forestry Research, a research group based in Indonesia, this report tackles the perception—widespread among drawing-room conservationists—that forests are wild areas devoid of people.

In fact, hundreds of millions of people, most of them poor, live in or near forests. Many more rely on forest products such as charcoal for survival. The notion of saving forests by putting them under lock and key would thus be hard to pull off. The best way to conserve forest is to give locals an interest in doing so, by granting them meaningful property rights over the habitat. That encourages cropping for a regular income, rather than a general scramble designed to carry off as much timber as possible, before someone else does so.

The report suggests that things are moving in the right direction. Over the past 15 years the amount of forest land that is in the hands of local communities or households (as opposed to national governments) has increased by 50%. In Latin America alone that has meant the transfer of some 10m km² (4m square miles), an

area that is roughly the size of Bolivia.

Besides such broad-brush figures, the report mentions specific cases. Since 1997, for example, indigenous folk in Oaxaca, Mexico, have been encouraged by the Mexican government and the World Bank to establish community forest enterprises. The government and the bank have helped local people to establish protected areas, organise businesses, and market wood and other products.

Since the scheme began, according to the report, the area under forest management has increased from 5,000km² to 6,500km². Meanwhile, Oaxaca has benefited from 1,300 new jobs, and extra timber revenues of some \$10m a year. The report also cites the example of Bolivia, which has embraced sweeping forestry reforms that not only give formal recognition to indigenous peoples' rights to forests, but also exempt small-scale producers from onerous regulations and concession fees.

Rich countries can benefit, too. A well-known example comes from New York, which was recently confronted with new federal water standards. Officials calculated that they would have to invest some \$5 billion to upgrade the city's water infrastructure to comply. Instead, they met the standards by spending about \$1 billion preserving forest and agricultural systems in the Catskills, the source of the city's water. These act as natural filters. Observing New York's success, officials in Ecuador are developing a similar scheme for Quito.

Not everyone is convinced, of course. John Palmer, a British government forestry official and self-styled “professional sceptic”, observed at the garden party held to launch the report that it put a spotlight on successes but largely ignored the failures. Perhaps. But its lessons should reinforce those successes and reduce the failures. ■



Better charcoal burning than forest burning