OPEN LETTER TO THE UN AND ITS INSTITUTIONS AND INITIATIVES RELATED TO FOREST ISSUES
(FAO, CBD, UNFCCC, UNCCD AND UNFF)

21 March – the first ‘International Day of Forests’

An appeal to urgently halt forest destruction, addressing the underlying causes

The UN has launched one more initiative to call attention to the fate of the world’s forests: 21 March from 2013 onwards will be the International Day of Forests. But will the Day make any difference to the forests and people who depend on them, considering that the UN International Year of Forests in 2011 went largely unnoticed?

Indeed, the UN should lead the measures to halt tropical deforestation, and therefore it should know and appropriately address the causes of forest loss. The most important direct causes of deforestation are quite well known, and include logging, the conversion of forested lands for agriculture and cattle-raising, industrial tree plantations, urbanization, mining, oil and gas exploitation, hydroelectric dams and industrial shrimp farming. The underlying causes that drive deforestation, however, are multiple, interrelated, less easily visible, and often little discussed and understood. A thorough process of analyzing underlying causes of deforestation, undertaken in the late 1990s by the UN with significant civil society participation, concluded that these drivers of deforestation are related to land tenure, resource management, trade, international economic relations in general and social exclusion.

The FAO claims that deforestation was lower in the period 2000-2010, compared with the previous decade. Still, 13 million hectares of mainly tropical forests, including mangrove forests, were destroyed each year in this period; and the actual figure is likely to be even higher because FAO continues to consider industrial plantations as forests. By defining “forests” as any land with a certain quantity of trees on it, the FAO distorts the data: the real forest loss appears lower than it actually is because for the FAO, industrial tree monocultures are the same as diverse forests that provide home and food for forest dependent peoples.

The International Day of Forests comes in the wake of renewed international attention to tropical forests that started with climate negotiators putting the role of forests in climate change on the agenda of UN climate talks: since 2007, the UN climate summits have been debating REDD – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. But have the efforts put into REDD+ resulted in reduced deforestation or at least a reversal of the current trend? Have the many initiatives undertaken since REDD emerged slowed the loss of forests worldwide? Are mangrove forests (“blue carbon”) less degraded today than they were in 2007? Are forest peoples’ rights better protected today than they were in 2007? Have the pledges of Northern governments to contribute US$ 7.7 billion, as well as the renewed attention itself for forests internationally really been able to slow, and eventually halt the loss of forests?
Recent reports from Brazil and Indonesia, the two countries where most of the forest was lost during 2000-2010, indicate that after a short dip in the rate of deforestation according to FAO statistics, deforestation is going on and many new forest areas are under threat of large-scale corporate-driven activities that destroy forests.

Those same actors involved in forest destruction are often at the same time involved in projects that allegedly aim to protect forests, for example through REDD+ projects. These actors include transnational corporations, Northern but also Southern governments, financial market institutions including the World Bank, big conservation NGOs and certification organizations. With the UN at the forefront, all of these key actors defend the so-called “green economy”, presented as a “win-win” approach that tackles both the economic-financial and environmental crises, by redirecting investments to unlock so-called “natural capital”, as well as new, supposedly clean technologies (such as those based on biomass) and the “carbon market”, as well as the trade in “environmental services” in general. In tropical forest countries, this is leading to increasing conflicts, human rights violations and resistance. The destruction, if anything, has increased, not decreased, let alone stopped (1).

**Forest destruction must be halted – urgently!**

This letter is an international appeal that forest destruction needs to be urgently halted – and not just “reduced”. Forests are vital for forest peoples, whose way of life depends on them. An indigenous leader from Eastern DRC states: “The forest and the indigenous peoples could be described as inseparable friends. The life of a pygmy depends 100% on the forest because the forest is our home ‘par excellence’. I can state that without the forest, there can be no life for indigenous peoples” (2). Halting deforestation and the recognition of land rights are of special importance for indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. An increase in land grabbing, much of it in forest areas, and the ongoing destruction of forests, particularly through the “concession model” of logging, agriculture and mining, put at risk the continued voluntary isolation because most often the areas where peoples in voluntary isolation are able to still survive on this planet and maintain their way of life are the very areas targeted by land grabbers.

Halting forest loss is also crucial to combat social exclusion and to respect the rights of Nature and its intrinsic value. Furthermore, forests are important for humanity in general, especially the populations in tropical forest countries. It is extremely concerning that forests are increasingly affected by the effects of climate change. The perpetuation of the current unsustainable production and consumption model is at the root of both, the climate and forest crises. Initiatives aimed at truly halting deforestation – or avoiding runaway climate change – will therefore need to address these root causes.

To halt deforestation, the underlying causes that drive forest loss need to be eliminated. Urgent actions needed towards this end include:
- Recognition of the rights of forest and forest-dependent communities over their communal territories with special attention to the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation; these rights must include the right to control decisions affecting the territories of forest dependent communities.

- Define forests by their true meaning for forest-dependent peoples; exclude industrial tree monoculture plantations from the definition: **Plantations are not forests.**

- Expose and halt the destruction caused by transnational corporations (TNCs) and other actors who lead the land grabbing process; the past decade has shown that TNCs cannot be regulated: their existence and increasing influence are a main threat for the future of tropical forests.

- Expose and break the pattern of corporate-driven false solutions like ‘sustainable’ large-scale activities in tropical forests, REDD+, trade in environmental services, public-private partnerships, certified “green economy”, etc. Instead, propose and defend true solutions which mean defending locally sustained economies, in terms of the use of for example minerals, biomass and energy. We reiterate the call of the international Oilwatch network: **Leave the oil in the soil and the coal in the hole!**

- Support efforts to consume less forest destroying products instead of initiatives that promote buying the certified products from large-scale operations and companies that continue to destroy forests.

Above all, on this first International Day of Forests we call on the UN and its forest-related institutions to heed the lessons of past initiatives aimed at ending deforestation: Halting forest loss will remain an illusion until action is undertaken to eliminate the underlying causes that drive deforestation.

Notes:
1.- For more information on Deforestation see “A brief overview of deforestation in tropical forests” at http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/188/A_brief_overview_of_deforestation.html
2.- http://www.wrm.org.uy/forests/Forests_Much_more_than_a%20_lot_of_trees.html

Signatories (Social Organizations, Networks, Movements and Individuals):

WRM - World Rainforest Movement
Abraham Cuellar Araujo, Fobomade-Pando Bolívia
Accao Academica para o Desenvolvimento das Comunidades Rurais-ADECRU Mozambique
Acción Ecológica Ecuador
Acción por la Biodiversidad
ACOPIAMA (Associação de Consultoria e Pesquisas Indianistas da Amazônia) Brasil
ACTION Plus ONG
Action Sociale pour le Développement Durable (ASDD) Gabon
Ademilson Pereira Souza, dirigente do MST-ES, membro da REDE ALERTA contra O DESERTO VERDE Brasil
Adi syaputra, Walhi Bengkulu Indonesia
Adilson Pereira de Oliveira Junior - Espírito Santo
Adonai Pacheco Teixeira
Alain TOSSOUNON, Journaliste
ALDAW INDIGENOUS NETWORK
Alejandra Miranda, estudiante de Ingeniería Forestal
Alina Dollat
All India Forum of Forest Movements
Alvaro González Ríos
Amanda Tas, nature conservationist
Amigos de la Tierra América Latina y el Caribe
Amigos de la Tierra Internacional
AMIGOS DEL BOSQUE
André Trouilloud
Angie Zelter, Reforest the Earth
Aníbal Bruzzone, Ing. Quim. Kompass
Ann de Ruig
Anthony Bahuaud
Antonio Cattaneo
ANTONIO FIGAL DOMINGUEZ
Arch. Gérard Béthoux
Ariel Araujo, Centro Mocovi Ialek Lav’a
Arsène Fortuné Madelon d’ALMEIDA
Asociaciòn Civil "Núcleo de Geografia Viva"
ASOCIACION CIVIL POR LA RESERVA
ASOCIACIÓN CONSERVACIONISTA YISKI
Asociación de Apicultores del Quindío, ASAQUÍN
Asociación Prodefensa de la Naturaleza, PRODENA
Associaçao dos Geografos Brasileiros GT Ambiente AGB
Associação Jaguaimbaba
Association Gabonaise pour les Nations Unies
Azafady
Barbara James Snyder
Beth Burrows
Bicuda Ecológica
Biofuelwatch
BIOS Argentina
Bios Iguana
Biowatch South Africa
Blue Forests Australia
BOS Deutschland e.V.
Bosque de Agua
Brian Komar
Bruce K. Cassels, Universidad de Chile
CAA NM - Centro de Agricultura Alternativa
CADTM - AYNA
CAPPA
Cáritas ES
Carlos Amorín Aguirre, Periodista. Escritor
Uruguay
Carmen-Socorro Rodríguez
Carbon Coaleston
Carrera de Sociología de la Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno,
Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Bolivia
Catherine Nsiami, Premicongo
Congo DR
CEEDeb for Biodiversity
CEIBA - Amigos de la Tierra Guatemala
Guatemala
Célia Dias
Brazil
CENSAT - Amigos de la Tierra Colombia
Colombia
Centro Burnier Fé e Justiça
Brasil
Centro Ecologista Renacer, Villa Constitución, Santa Fe
Argentina
Cepedes
Brasil
Chabi-Yaouré Nelly Faï
Benin
Clara E. Riveros Sosa
Argentina
Claude Sarrazin Picvert Environmental Organisation
Francia
Cleber César Buzatto, Conselho Indigenista Missionário - Cimi
Brasil
Climate Justice Campaign
South Africa
COECOCEIBA - Amigos de la Tierra Costa Rica
Costa Rica
Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo.
Colombia
Colectivo de trabajo Jenzera
Colombia
Colectivo VientoSur
Chile
Collectif Pêche et Développement
Community Resource Centre
India
Consejo Autónomo Aymara
Consejo de Investigaciones en Desarrollo CIID-Guatemala
Guatemala
Constanza López Trujillo, Asociacion Grupo ecológico Santa Rosa
Colombia
Consultoria de Estudios y Evaluación de Proyectos, SC. Mazatlán, Sinaloa
Mexico
Cooperativa Organica Madre Tierra
CRIPADD (Cercle Recherche pour l'Identification et Promotion des Alternatives du Développement Durable)
Cristián Frêne Conget, Ingeniero Forestal, Mg. en Recursos Hídricos,
Dr.(c) en Ecología
Chile
Danilo Cueva, FAPECAFES-IISKRES
Ecuador
David Hallowes, Durban
South Africa
Di Dold, COASTWATCH-KZN
South Africa
Domingos Patacho, Quercus
Portugal
Dominique Véret
Dr and Mrs R Mankowski
South Africa
Dr Erick Virgile AZANDO, PhD, Enseignant - Chercheur
Benin
Dr Mathieu Wadjia EGNANKOU, SOS-Forêts
Côte d’Ivoire
Dr. Christian F. Weisser
Alemania
Dr. Klemens Laschefski, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Brasil
Dr. Onno Gross, Marine Conservation Organization
Dr. Paulo Cezar Mendes Ramos, GT contra os agrotóxicos e
Brasil
transgênicos, Associação Brasileira de Agroecologia
Dr.V.Balaji, OMCAR Foundation
India
Dwitho Frasetiandy, WALHI South Kalimantan, Friends Of The
Earth Of Indonesia
Indonesia
Eco Sitio
Argentina
Ecological Society of the Philippines
Philippines
Ecologistas en Acción
España
EcoNexus

Edgar Jaimes, Grupo de Investigación de Suelo y Agua. Universidad de
Los Andes, Núcleo de Trujillo
Venezuela
Edgar Palacios
España
Eduardo Baird
Argentina
Eduardo Luís Ruppenthal, Professor de Biologia
Brasil
Elder Andrade de Paula - Prof Associado, Univ Federal do Acre
Brasil
Eliege Maria Fante, Jornalista, Porto Alegre
Brasil
Eliseo Castellano, Fundación Jardín Botánico UNELLEZ
Venezuela
EMACE
Sri Lanka
Emilia Wanda Rutkowski, UNICAMP
Brasil
Environment East Gippsland
Australia
Environmental Rights Action - Friends of the Earth Nigeria
Nigeria
ETC group
International
Eunice Dias de Paula CIMI MT
Brasil
Eva Cardona
España
Evelyn Schönheit / Jupp Trauth. Forum Ökologie und Papier
Alemanía
Fabiana Anciutti Orreda
Brasil
Fernandes Godóís
Brasil
Fernando B. Rubio del Valle
Peru
Fernando Quirola Anzoátegui. Colegio de Arquitectos Machala-El Oro
Ecuador
Filipe Correia Duarte
Brasil
Flávio Vivian, Eldorado do Sul
Brasil
Floribert MASANI MUNGUATOSHA, C.I.E.C.R.A / Réseau CREF, GOMA
Congo DR
FOBOMADE - FORO BOLIVIANO SOBRE MEDIO AMBIENTE Y DESARROLLO
Bolivia
Focus on the Global South

Foro Ecologista de Paraná
Argentina
Forum Masyarakat Sipil untuk Keadilan iklim
Indonesia
Fórum Mudanças Climáticas e Justiça Social
Brasil
Francisneide de Sousa Lourenço, Comissão Pastoral da Terra –
Regional Amazonas
Brasil
Françoise Widmer

Frédéri DJINADJA
Togo
Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC)
Philippine
Frei Luiz Carlos Susin - World Forum on Theology and Liberation
Brasil
Friends of the Earth Finland
Finland
Friends of the Earth Australia
Australia
Friends of the Landless
Finland
Fundación Eco Urbano
Argentina
FUNDACIÓN ECOLÓGICA COSMOS Colombia
Gary Lim, EDUTREE Services Malaysia
Germán Escobar Berón, Etnobiólogo Colombia
Geslin OMEME ESSONO
Global Forest Coalition
Global Justice Ecology Project USA
Global network Indigenous Peoples, human and Mother earth
Rights: EARTH PEOPLES
Green Cross Society from Lviv Ukraine
Green Perspective Foundation Slovakia
Griselda Urich Argentina
Grupo Guayubira Uruguay
Grupo Mesófilo Mexico
GT (Grupo de Trabalho) de Ambiente da Associação dos Geógrafos Brasil
Brasileiros Seção Vitoria/ES Brasil
GUSTAVO SOTO SANTIESTEBAN, CEADESC - Centro de Estudios Bolivia
Aplicados a los Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales
Guy Wallbanks, York and Ryedale Friends of the Earth
Hadi jatmiko, Walhi South Sumatera Indonesia
Hariansyah Usman, WALHI Riau Indonesia
Heffa Schuecking, Urgewald Alemania
Helder Gomes, Rede Alerta-ES Brasil
Henri Auguste, H2O Gabon Gabon
Hilary Sandison, Periodista Anglo-Francesa Francia
Horacio de Belaustegui, Fundacion Biosfera Argentina
Htay Lin, Mangrove Service Network (MSN) Myanmar
Hugh Lee, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow Ireland
ICRA International
India Resource Center US
Iniciativa Radial, ONG Periodística Argentina
Instituto Latinoamericano para una Sociedad y un Derecho Alternativos - ILSA Colombia
Irene Lau Peru
Irene Maria Cardoso
Irmã Iolanda Maria Borges Benin
ISSA A. Mikaiïa, Journaliste
JA - Amigos de la Tierra Mozambique Mozambique
Jaime Schmitz Brasil
Jarbas A. Silva - FRC Brasil
Jaruwan Kaewmahanin, Mangrove Action Project - MAP, Asia Office Thailand
Jean Donatien Nshimirimana, Propreté, Environnement et Santé "P.E.S." Burundi
Jeffrey Glogiewicz Puerto Rico
Jim Enright, Mangrove Action Project
Jo Hadley
Jorge Cappato, Fundación PROTEGER Argentina
Jorge Eduardo Rodriguez Quirós Costa Rica
Jorge Ernesto Llosa Montagne
Jorge Varela Márquez, Premio Goldman 1999 Honduras
José Gomes de Melo Júnior, Eng.ª Florestal, especialista em Agroecologia
Josué ÉVOUNA NGUEMA
Juan Corral Aguirre
Juan Hernández Zubizarreta, profesor Universidad del País Vasco
Juan Longo (Toba-Qom), Asociación Civil Construyendo Ciudadanos
Juan Ortiz Burgos, Asociación Proteger
Julio-Néstor Sosa Benia
Just Forests
Justiça Global
Kenn Mondiai, Partners With Melanesians
KOINONIA Presença Ecumênicas e Serviço
La Asamblea Ambientalista Santotomeña
La Red Internacional de Forestería Análoga
Laia Serra Valls, periodista, Barcelona
Laurence Cortadellas, ZHI ROU JIA
LEOMAR HONORATO LIRIO, COORDENAÇÃO DO MOVIMENTO DOS PEQUENOS AGRICULTORES - MPA/BRASIL
Lino Matheus de Sá Pereira
Livia Morena Brantes Bezerra - Engenhira Florestal
LLASTAY-PARA LA DEFENSA DEL MEDIO AMBIENTE
Luart Association
Luc D. KOUNOUHO, DODJI ASSOCIATION
LUCIANO JUÁREZ GARCÍA, INGENIERO QUÍMICO METALÚRGICO
Luiz Gouvêa de Paula CIMI MT
Luiza Maria Coimbra Coffler
Luz Guillén Cornejo, Pastoral de la Tierra/Vicariato Apostólico de Yurimaguas
M. Sarimin BOENGKIHZ, Agence Kanak de Developpement
M.E. Perez
Maddalena Bebi
MADOHONAN D. Désiré, Technicien Supérieur en Aménagement et Protection de l’Environnement
Maendeleo Endelevu Action Program (MEAP)
Maison de l’Enfant et de la Femme Pygmées (MEFP)
Mal Mitchell
Mandy Haggith, Worldforests
Mangrove Action Project (MAP)
Mangue Vivo - preservação e estudo científico, Universidade Federal do Ceará
Marc Flegel
Marc Flegel
Marcel ZOUMENOU, Journaliste, Rédacteur en chef du quotidien La Nouvelle Tribune
Marcos Ampudia
Marcos Rostagno
Marcus Colchester
Maria Andrea Olcese

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Republique Centrafricaine
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USA
Brasil
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Argentina
UK
Argentina
Maria Angela Torres Kremers, Revista digital Yarumo
Maria Cecilia Macera Urquizo
MARÍA DEL CARMEN RIVASPLATA
Maria Elena Saludas, ATTAC - Argentina
Maria Eva Cavanellas, estudiante de ecología
Maria Inés Aiuto, Campaña Paren con la plantaciones Forestales, GRR
Maria Isabel Manta Nolasco
María Marques de Sousa
Marilda de S. Velho, Pastoral da Saúde, Santa Catarina
Marilda Teles Maracci
Mario Rivera Andrade, Quito
Martin Castro
Matías Francia
MBA VICTORIEN, ONG APED
Mercedes Magdalena Daculna
Méryas D. KOUTON, Directeur du Parc National de la Pendjari
Michel Saini, ArBio
Miguel Marín, FEDICAMP
Mlle Hermione Boko-Koudakossi
Monica Roxana Gallardo
Monica S. Cassels, Salta
Monsieur Boco KANA-GABA
Movimento Amigos da Rua Gonçalo de Carvalho, Porto Alegre
Movimento Nacional de Afetados por Desastres Socioambientais - MONADES
Movimento Madre Tierra - Amigos de la Tierra Honduras
Múcio Tosta Gonçalves, Economista
NAT - Amigos de la Tierra Brasil
National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) / FoE Uganda
Nature Tropicale ONG
Naturismo Tropical de Puerto Rico
Nemesio Juan Rodríguez Mitchell, PUMC-UNAM Oaxaca
Neuza Soares
Nibedita Mukherjee, PhD student
Nina somera
NOAH Friends of the Earth Denmark
Norman Jiwan
Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de America Latina
Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales. OLCA.
Ode Rakhman, Walhi Sulawesi Utara
Odila Cadore
Ole Siosiomaga Society Incorporated (OLSSI)
OLEDD
Orlanda Rodrigues Alves
Orlando Pantoja. COCOCAUCA: Coordinacion de Consejos comunitarios y organizaciones de base del pueblo negro del pacifico en Cauca
Alemania / Colombia
Peru
Argentina
Argentina
Argentina
Peru
Brasil
Brazil
Ecuador
Mexico
Cameroun
Argentina
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Nicaragua
Argentina
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Brasil
Brasil
Uganda
Benin
Puerto Rico
Mexico
Brasil
Belgium
Denmark
Chile
Indonesia
Samoa
Congo DR
Colombia
Oscar Leonel Atz Castro, CEIBA  
Otros Mundos - Amigos de la Tierra México  
Otros Mundos AC/ RECOMA  
Pablo Kaplun  
PACS - Instituto Politicas Alternativas para o Cone Sul  
Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum  
Pandu Hegde, Chipko-Appiko Movement  
Pascal ASSOGBA, Ingénieur des Eaux et Forêts  
Patrice SAGBO  
Patrice SOGLO, Journaliste  
Patrick Bond, University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society  
Patrick Dowling  
Pe. Gianfranco Graziola, Centro de Migrações e Direitos Humanos  
Paco Raimundo, Raimundo  
 Pedro Pozas Terrados, Proyecto Gran Simio (GAP/PGS)  
Pedro Sousa Silva de Paula Ribeiro, Eng. Florestal  
Pélagie Lucile SOLOTE, journaliste  
PELUM  
Planet Survey  
Plataforma Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo (PIDHDD)  
Primates Africa  
Pro REGENWALD  
Protet Judicaël ESSONO ONDO, ONG Brainforest  
RAPAL Uruguay  
Rebecca Sommer  
RECOMA - Red contra los monocultivos de árboles  
Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Sociales y Ambientales  
Red Nacional de Acción Ecologista  
Rede Alerta Contra o Deserto Verde-RJ  
REDES - Amigos de la Tierra Uruguay  
Redmanglar Internacional  
René Salizar Farfán  
Réseau CREF (Réseau pour la Conservation et la réhabilitation des Écosystèmes Forestiers)  
Rettet den Regenwald  
Ricardo A Montaño. Asociacion JUNPRO  
Ricardo Corrales  
RITA / Red Indígena de Turismo de México  
Robert Palgrave, Biofuelwatch  
Roberto Martins de Souza, Coordenação do Fórum de Recursos Naturais - PROENS/IFPR  
Robin Clanahan  
Robin Wood  
Rocio Zini, Universidad Autónoma de Entre Rios  
Rogatien BIAOU, Millennium Institute for Local Development  
Guatemala  
Mexico  
México  
Venezuela  
Brazil  
India  
Benin  
Benin  
South Africa  
South Africa  
Brasil  
España  
Brasil  
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USA  
Peru  
Congo DR  
Alemania  
Colombia  
Costa Rica  
Mexico  
UK  
Brasil  
South Africa  
Alemania  
Argentina  
Benin