

How Industrial Agriculture Affects Current and Future Conditions for Communities and Conservation

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This background paper provides an analysis of how industrial agriculture affects the current and future conditions for the survival and welfare of the great apes and gibbons.

It draws on the experience of the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), and our civil society and community partners, to examine how industrial agriculture influences communities' perceptions and actions with respect to conservation—be it of an ecosystem as a whole or of specific species such as great apes and gibbons. It focuses on our experience of the palm oil industry, particularly in Liberia.

The Problem

The key point that needs to be highlighted is that the current approach to development and conservation is simply not working—neither in terms of human rights, nor development, nor conservation. This assessment is borne out in the scientific literature, which we will return to shortly, and it is also borne out by communities' experience in our work on the ground.

The current model assumes that the large-scale industrialization of the landscape is inevitable and necessary, that it improves the quality of life of people globally and in local communities, and that it involves generating profit that can help pay for conservation efforts. The current model therefore assumes that all we can do is seek to mitigate its impacts on communities in the following ways:

- from a human rights perspective: by asking companies to take communities through a process of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) that should allow communities to say yes or no to the plans companies already have in place;
- from a development perspective: by seeking to ensure that as many local people as possible are taken on as workers in the company that has now taken over their lands; and
- from a conservation perspective: by requiring that the company set aside designated high conservation value (HCV) areas to act as islands of biodiversity in the much vaster and increasingly impoverished industrialized landscape.

However, the scientific literature demonstrates that dividing the landscape into, on the one hand, increasingly industrialized and culturally and ecologically impoverished areas and, on the other hand, islands of strict forest protection, in which all or most human inhabitation and activity are forbidden, is largely ineffective in the short term and futile in the long term.

In contrast, wherever forest communities have secure collective tenure of their lands, the scientific literature and the studies of the Forest Peoples Programme show that these communities are the ones best placed to protect their forests. Our own experience working with forest communities reveals that when communities are persuaded to hand over land to companies bent on industrial agriculture, the consequences are community division and the loss of secure livelihoods (e.g., Kenrick *et al.*, 2012; Lomax, Kenrick and Brownell, 2012).

This dynamic has profound implications for how we address the question underlying this edition of *State of the Apes*, whose aim is to identify ways to reconcile the human need for wellbeing and the overriding need for us to protect our environment. By maintaining an environment in which our fellow species and ecological systems flourish, we ensure there is a future for ourselves.

We are unlikely to be able to address this matter satisfactorily if we continue to think within an intellectual and political climate that assumes the inevitable persistence of a top-down approach to development in which the large players—in this case, for-profit corporations working with their allies in government, and non-profit conservation bodies working with the international community—continue to take over community lands on the premise of spreading development and prosperity while protecting emblematic ecosystems and species.

When communities seek to create space and opportunity for the maintenance of ecological systems and other species—for conservation and the wellbeing of apes—while yielding to industrial agricultural development, they almost inevitably get squeezed between profit-driven and conservation-driven land grabbing. This process ultimately alienates them from conservation-related concerns and from the long-standing, dynamic livelihood systems that have sustained them, their forests and the ecosystems and species that make up the mosaic of farmland and forests on which they have depended (e.g. Colchester and Chao, 2011)

Experts estimate that the world's farm output must increase 60% by 2050 to meet the anticipated global demand for agricultural products, and that an additional 700,000 km² (70 million ha) of arable land will be needed to meet this predicted demand (Alexandratos and Bruinsma, 2012, p. 7). These predictions are often used as justifications for industrialized forms of agriculture. Instead, such forecasts could provide us with a strong reason for examining whether maintaining a system of rapid urbanization and promoting the concentration of land ownership are sustainable approaches. They could also prod us to reverse the exodus driven by expropriation, namely by supporting communities to build on high-yield but high-diversity forest and farmscapes that maintain ecological integrity, encourage concern for ecological wellbeing and enable social cohesion and sufficiency. In this way, the drive for more children to ensure some security in old age is replaced by living within population and ecological limits in order to ensure the community as a whole benefits from that sufficiency.

Experts also point out that, in addition to the increasing demand for food crops, the investment in crops for agrofuels and other products is rising, and they acknowledge that oil palm—used for food, cosmetics and agrofuels—is the fastest-growing monoculture in the world. They add that for agriculture to be sustainable and able to meet the demand for food and commodities, it needs to be considered in the context of a rapidly changing world. In evaluating these findings, it should be recognised that—even in recent history—rapid changes also result from unforeseen events, which may be the consequence of planned human choices.

It is important to highlight—as these experts do—how urbanization, growing inequities and divisions between the poor and the wealthy, human migration, climate change, water shortages and floods, environmental degradation, globalization, and changing dietary preferences are all

influencing agricultural practice around the world. It is probably as critical to demonstrate that there are effective and realistic alternatives to this scenario, and that if we are to avoid the extinction of apes outside of captivity, along with our own extinction, then these alternatives need to be examined, discussed and adapted to suit all our needs.

As has been widely acknowledged, industrial agriculture is a major cause of encroachment into tropical forest, affecting local and global food security and exerting pressure on productive capacity and ecosystems. However, it may be mistaken to describe the political, social and economic dynamics that drive the expansion of industrial agriculture as very complex, rather than as very simple. The dynamics of profit maximization, empowered by the notion that they are inevitable, and excused by the notion that they will benefit those who are expropriated as well as the wider public, are the simple forces at work.

How these simple forces play out on the ground in any particular situation is, in contrast, extremely complex.

In general, the process of divide and rule is set in motion once certain members of the political elite at the national, regional and local levels are persuaded that they will benefit from siding with what is presented as an inevitable process—and so becomes an inevitable process—whereby some people receive the benefits and jobs, while many others simply lose the lands that they have relied on for generations.

Into this context step conservation bodies that seek to protect what they can of rapidly vanishing ecosystems and species ranges. If such organizations accept the premise of the inevitability of this process, then they end up working with multinationals and other companies to, in some cases, ensure that the felled indigenous forest is left lying to protect the carbon in the dead trees; in other cases, they do so to ensure areas are left untouched and protected—not only from company activity, but also from traditional shifting cultivation—in order to protect particular species or ecosystem services.

Thus, in this framework of industrial land grab accompanied by green land grab, communities are alienated from their own lands and effectively wind up competing with each other for limited social resources—namely jobs with the company. At the same time, they compete with conservationists for the remaining land, which also happens to be the only land left that can provide some security for community members.

In this model, industrialized landscapes can include islands of conservation, but those islands are unsustainable—both in the long term, due to the ongoing expansion and impact of industrial agriculture, and in the short term, since these lands are the only ones left for communities who rely on them.

The Solution

As noted above, the scientific literature and our own studies show that when forest communities have secure collective tenure of their lands, they are the ones best placed to protect their forests. Only if communities retain their rights to lands and are permitted to enable income generation—to pay for education, health, and other services—by developing dynamic and sustainable livelihood systems, perhaps with external support, can there also be a route for great ape conservation, ecosystem health and human development.

In other words, a three-part game is being played out, and the question is whether we will continue to prioritize one of these factors—namely the expansion of industrialized agriculture based on the dynamics involved in the drive for profit—or whether we will prioritize the other two—the well-being of communities and the lands on which they have depended, and on which they could continue to depend if we were to recognize their rights, and the rights of other species.

Evidence for Community-Based Forest Conservation

Two studies show that the application of strict conservation measures is less effective in reducing deforestation than the establishment of community forests that are managed and controlled by indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities in multiple-use systems.¹

One of these studies is the Climate and Land Use Alliance’s statistical analysis of annual deforestation rates as reported in 73 peer-reviewed case studies conducted in the tropics. It finds that deforestation is significantly lower in community-managed forests than in strict protected forests. It concludes that:

community tenure over forests can result in more forest cover and more species-rich forests, less deforestation and degradation, and fewer fires than some other approaches to protecting forests. These beneficial forest outcomes are more likely if communities are “traditional” or have a long term relationship with their natural resources, if the forest provides them with some livelihood options, and if community forest rights are secure and enforced (Seymour, La Vina and Hite, 2014, p. iii).

The other study finds that some community-managed forests are located in areas with higher deforestation pressures than strict protected areas. Taking this into account, it concludes that, in comparison to strict protected areas, community-managed forests are associated with significantly greater reductions in deforestation, especially if they are managed and controlled by indigenous peoples (Veríssimo *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, in Mexico, rates of deforestation decreased from 2% p.a. to less than 0.2% as a result of increased community ownership (Barton Bray, Merino-Perez and Barry, 2005). The more authority a community secures to regulate a forest, the more committed, and the more effective their efforts will be (e.g. Ribot, 2004; Pierce Colfer and Capitstrano, 2005).

Evidence for Self-Determined Community Development

That these communities have engaged in dynamic low-impact livelihoods that have allowed conservation of the forests and the persistence of biodiversity for centuries is evident in the persistence of those ecosystems. The very places that conservationists seek to have designated as protected areas are the places where communities live, or lived, in such a way as not to threaten the survival of ecosystems and species—until the dynamic described above comes into play through, for example, colonial or post-colonial corporate appropriation and pressure.

The basis of sustainable livelihood systems is thus evident in such places. In Liberia, for example, communities that have a diversity of food production may simply require the creation of, or access to, markets in order to be able to maintain the security of sufficient food production and to gain income from market access. That income can enable them to have the means to get their children through education, to provide medical care when needed, and so on.

¹ In the interest of brevity, this text highlights just two relevant studies, yet a large body of evidence could be cited with reference to carbon stocks and other factors (e.g., Chhatre and Agrawal, 2009; Rights and Resources Initiative, 2016).

However, instead of being offered the opportunities to develop their livelihood systems on this basis—one that does not bring them into conflict with the ecosystems or other species that live in and make up their forests—they are presented with industrialized agriculture, such as oil palm, as though it were the only option and, moreover, inevitable and unstoppable. Indeed, companies and government officials create a context in which communities and individuals scramble to give their land to the companies in the hope that they will get employment; in turn, their farms and forestlands, and the very basis for their sociality and culture, are set to vanish while giving way to degraded and devastated landscapes.

Some very small areas may be preserved for socio-cultural reasons, such as gravesites, but these become meaningless as the towns that gave them significance are abandoned. If they get work, community members move to buildings on company grounds; otherwise, they move elsewhere to try to find work.

The fig-leaf approach is not only applied to socio-cultural protection; it is also used in attempts to protect forestlands as conservation areas. Not only does this set up the conflict between remaining community members, but it also serves to maintain the illusion that an island approach to ecosystem and species protection is possible—refocusing the energy and attention of conservationists from challenging the overall dynamic to struggling to secure a temporary place for species and forests in a rapidly degrading landscape.

Given the chance to reflect on what they really want, communities appear to want development that builds on—rather than destroys—the ecological, social and cultural basis for their existence.

Given the chance to reflect on what they really want, conservationists would no doubt opt for a form of conservation that similarly sustains communities, forests and species. The alternative involves accepting that forests need to be cleared to establish intensive industrial agriculture, asking only that some HCV forest be set aside for conservation and knowing that this approach will only lead to the destruction of sustainable livelihoods and ultimately of the forest itself and, therefore, of the possibility of ape conservation.

Tools Used to Restrict Dispossession of Communities and Forest Destruction

The High Conservation Value (HCV) Methodology

While high conservation value sounds good, the way it has been implemented in practice by Greenpeace and others in Liberia has been the imposition of set-asides of environmental HCV areas alongside industrial oil palm plantations. This imposition of conservation alongside the imposition of oil palm can mean that there is no room left for community livelihoods (Forest Peoples Programme, 2015a).

In some cases, communities may offer forestland to a company, which then informs them that it has to leave that forest intact because of HCV. The company might subsequently ask for the communities' farmlands, leaving them deprived of cropland and obliged to make use of HCV areas for their livelihoods.

The situation ends up with conservationists and companies thinking they have done well, although they actually set the conditions for the destruction of communities' livelihoods and of the forest itself.

Under the concession agreement between the Government of Liberia and a company, any undeveloped areas in the concession are supposed to revert to the government. What this means is that communities lose their land to companies and areas that the company does not use for industrial agriculture are set aside for conservation and inevitably impacted by the community whose own farmland has been taken; meanwhile, the government reclaims set-aside land from the company. It is thus not only the community that loses out in the face of the company and conservation, but also the forest itself.

Developing the RSPO complaints procedure into a Whakatane-type process

Efforts could be undertaken to prevent companies from running the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and other, more recent initiatives that seek to mimic the RSPO by bringing in expert organizations that do not threaten them, but rather depend on them. Specifically, the RSPO complaints procedure could be developed into a Whakatane-type process whereby communities themselves take the lead, supported by FPP and others (Forest Peoples Programme, 2012; Whakatane Mechanism, n.d.).

Just like the palm oil industry, the RSPO subscribes to the dominant palm oil model as a means to attain economic, social and conservation objectives. At the moment, the conservation organizations appear to be, perhaps unwittingly, complicit in sustaining this model by working with it, rather than challenging it.

When communities lack security of tenure under national law, then they are not seen as a legitimate negotiating party, and therefore negotiations are held between the government and a company, and communities' interests are all too easily overridden (Kenrick *et al.*, 2012, Lomax *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, the international mechanisms and players to which communities with grievances turn — such as the RSPO and, to an extent, the HCV mechanism—are built on a model that does not really accommodate communities (Colchester and Chao, 2011).

In Liberia, a recent visit of the RSPO complaints team to investigate the oil palm developer Golden Veroleum Liberia left communities and civil society convinced that the RSPO was entirely captured by the company (Forest Peoples Programme, 2015b). Current public confidence in the RSPO process is perilously low, which could have dire consequences in such an unstable and conflict-ridden context.

From a conservation perspective, The Forest Trust and Greenpeace are highly critical of the RSPO—seeing its standards as too weak and its implementation as poor; these organizations have been involved in setting up alternative standards, such as the No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation Policy, in which Wilmar is involved, and the Forest Conservation Policy, in which Golden Agri Resources is involved. The problem with these is that although their standards may be better, they have no multi-stakeholder involvement or enforcement mechanism.

Even more crucially, though, none of these processes is community-led in the way that the Whakatane Mechanism is.

Perhaps this is the critical shift that is required to ensure that communities can address the issue as equal players. If the RSPO process can be turned on its head so that communities take the lead and evaluate a range of development options, rather than simply being offered a take-it-or-leave-it form of FPIC, then this international mechanism could be a means to address fundamental social and ecological issues rather than simply a cover for appropriation.

Similarly, the HCV process could address social issues if it were to take on board values 5 and 6—cultural and social values and needs—as being fundamental, rather than as irritating necessities. Instead of being a futile attempt to temporarily rescue a few areas of high value to conservationists, the HCV process could become a way of building strong alliances dedicated to conserving ecosystems, species and sustainable livelihoods at the local, regional and international levels.

The key may be to harness both the RSPO process and the HCV process to serve the development needs of communities, in a way that is based on their conservation of their environments. Doing so would require both processes to be reshaped in a form that mirrors the Whakatane Mechanism that ensures that communities—rather than companies, governments or conservation bodies—take the lead.

While that step does not resolve the problem, it creates a context in which:

- communities have to engage in dialog among themselves to establish whether and how they are committed to sustaining their communities and their environments; and
- communities can engage with companies, governments and conservation bodies on a far more equal footing, to a far more sustainable end.

Two quotations from indigenous leaders highlight why this process is needed. The first is from a Baka leader from southern Cameroon, who spoke of the way they respond to powerful outsiders by simply telling them what the Baka think they want to hear:

We know what people want us to say so we say it, but we know what we really want.

In Kenya, the creation of a context in which communities can say what they really want and, therefore, find out what they really want through honest intra-community dialog, has worked very well (Forest Peoples Programme, 2013). There, the Ogiek of Mt. Elgon have been able to create conservation community bylaws and override those in the community who are only interested in short-term benefit—by taking on a long-term perspective. In so doing, they are foregrounding an approach to the future that is rooted in what they know from the past:

We have not conserved; it is the way we live that conserves.

Abbreviations

FPIC	Free, prior and informed consent
FPP	Forest Peoples Programme
HCV	High conservation value
p.a.	per annum
RSPO	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

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