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Protecting our forests

Our glorious Vermont summer has arrived, and the first of my sugar snap peas are ready to eat. The forests everywhere are green and lush in their burst of summer growth, which will last only until the leaves turn in late September. This forest growth period is short, but Vermont depends on it for its beauty, its wildlife, fuel wood and tourists. It is at the heart of our identity as a state and a people.

Protecting the forests of the earth is a big issue this year. Forests act as a brake on our warming climate because they take up and store some of the carbon dioxide that comes from the burning of fossil fuels. Here in the Northeast we need a healthy balance, so that our forests continue to grow and store carbon, even as we burn some of that growth each winter as fuel.

The United States and China are the two countries that have the largest emissions of CO₂. Together they are responsible for about half the global emissions that, because of the greenhouse effect, are driving the earth towards dangerous climate change. The two countries with the next largest emissions of CO₂ are Brazil and Indonesia, although not much of it comes from burning fossil fuels. Most results from the destruction of their tropical forests as they are converted to agriculture. This returns carbon stored in the trees and soil back to the atmosphere as CO₂, which accelerates the warming of our planet.

Many schemes are being discussed to try to reverse this dangerous path under the acronym REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation). It is relatively cheap to reduce emissions from deforestation. But it still costs money to protect a rain forest, when it could be cleared to grow soybeans. So the big question is, as always: Who pays?

One proposal is to raise money from carbon markets. For instance, we have the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative market here in the Northeast, where CO₂ emission allowances are auctioned to power plants. But presently the money raised is used to fund needed efficiency improvements and renewable energy projects here, rather than to protect tropical forests. There are other offset schemes in which people in richer countries continue to burn fossil fuels but pay "offsets" — payments to protect forests in tropical countries. You can see why this is an attractive idea. Our wasteful lives can go on undisturbed, but we can feel good because we pay a small penance. Unfortunately, humanity needs to do both: reduce our wasteful use of fossil fuels and reduce deforestation.

So the debate about who should pay to save our precious planet from dangerous climate change is not an easy one. The industrial nations are responsible for burning most of the fossil carbon, which will stay in the atmosphere for centuries. And the poorer tropical countries will suffer most from climate change. The current climate bill in Congress does not transfer enough funds to help the poorer nations protect their forests and adapt to climate change.

The industrial countries are the richest, and indirectly fossil fuels have largely powered the creation of our wealth. But right now we don't feel rich because we are in debt in so many different ways. We build roads and bridges, and we then become dependent on them — but we don't put aside money for their repair and replacement. We burn fossil fuels, but don't allocate funds to undo the damage to the global environment later. We build nuclear power plants, but don't save enough money to clean up the radioactive waste later. We refuse to budget the full costs of our choices and actions. But all these debts against the future will have to be repaid — if not by us, then by our children.

It is easy for Vermonters to understand why preserving forests matters to the world. Forests stabilize our climate by storing carbon, they protect watersheds from flooding and they preserve wildlife and biodiversity. We will have to manage our forests carefully, as the pressure mounts to burn more wood as fuel. The principles are the same here and in the tropics: We need working forests with sustainable harvests, a diversity of life and a long-term future.

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Union of Concerned Scientists, forest solutions : ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/forest_solutions/