

16049 HOPE FOR THE TREES

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UNTIL the 1960s, forest-clearing accounted for most anthropogenic carbon emissions. Now it causes around 10% – a decline that led many at the UN climate summit in Paris to focus their efforts elsewhere. Though Norway, Germany and Britain said they would make a billion dollars a year available for averting tropical deforestation until 2020, America, France and Japan refused to chip in. Australia trumpeted a pro-tree plan of its own, but has not pledged more money for it. There was little mention of Indonesia's devastating wildfires, or of a 16% uptick in deforestation in Brazil.

Yet the 10% share hugely understates the importance of forests to the fight against climate change. Just as shrinking forests contribute to global warming, growing ones can counter it. During the 2000s tropical forests are estimated to have sopped up and stored carbon equivalent to 22-26% of carbon-dioxide emissions from human activity. Ending tropical deforestation and letting damaged forests recover could cut net emissions by almost a third, creating a space for industrial emissions to fall more slowly.

The Paris agreement failed to create mechanisms, such as carbon markets, that could generate the much larger sums necessary for conservation on that scale. That was expected; on a more realistic measure of progress, forests did pretty well. Reducing deforestation and forest degradation - REDD+ in the jargon -has finally been enshrined as a mainstream climate policy. Over 60 countries included it in their commitments. It got its own clause in the final deal, with an approving nod to ways of designing and running REDD+ schemes agreed on in previous climate talks. Schemes can be funded publicly or privately, with payment for success in leaving trees standing.

Whether REDD+ can fulfil its potential remains unclear. By one measure, the net global deforestation rate has fallen in recent years. Yet, despite improvements in monitoring tropical deforestation and establishing baselines against which it can be measured, REDD+ probably played a minor part. Brazil dislikes the idea of "offsetting" – letting other countries emit more in return for paying to keep its trees standing. Indonesia has, in effect, downgraded the REDD+ agency it set up in a deal with Norway, and failed to spend most of the billion dollars that the Norwegians provided.

Rich countries say this shows that what is mainly lacking is political will. Those with tropical forests retort that the failure to cough up the large sums they were promised vindicates their wariness. Both are right.

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