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## EDITORIAL

# How to avoid ecocide at the petrol pump

Sustainability has become a mantra for many people recently and is a new objective of most governments. The issue was flagged by the Brundtland Commission's *Our Common Future* report in 1987, but not seriously addressed. The rich world is still developing unsustainably at an ever faster pace. As a result we face growing crises with climate, food production, and energy security. Without more honest insight and action, our efforts to reach the promised sustainable land are likely to be confused and perpetuate the very unsustainable pattern we wish to change.

Take for example, the push for 'sustainable biofuels,' which must be the most appalling sham of a sustainability plan devised so far. It's being driven by rich countries and development banks mandating targets for using a percentage of 'sustainable biofuels' in cars to replace some fossil fuel use. If the biofuels were being sourced from within these countries there could be little objection.

But we are unwilling to reduce energy consumption and unable to source biofuels in our own countries for our huge and ever-growing car use. As a result third world countries in Africa, Latin America and South East Asia have been singled out as suitable regions to keep the rich world in the style to which it has become accustomed, providing it with cheap, 'sustainable biofuels.' Rich countries say these third world countries have plenty of 'marginal land' suitable for biofuel production, but third world people, where most of the world's people live far more sustainable lives and without cars, say this ignores the presence of

pastoralists, indigenous people and small farmers on these lands (p.41).

With climate now changing through greenhouse gas emissions, largely from the rich countries, the tropical third world countries are being hit hardest and soonest while contributing least to the problem. It does seem selfish that in such already stressful circumstances, rich countries are planning to exploit third world resources and their people to produce 'sustainable biofuels' for the rich world cars, which are a luxury, not a necessity of life. However it is simply criminal that countries known to be drought and famine countries in sub-Saharan Africa are now being used to grow 'biofuels,' for cars, greatly increasing suffering and hunger in these countries (p.32–35). African organisations from many countries are calling for a moratorium on 'biofuel' developments, saying it's bringing disastrous socio-economic impacts, devouring communally owned land and water resources and will exacerbate Africa's climate and food security problems.

Third world peoples suffering the effects of the 'biofuel' boom say the word 'biofuel' is incorrect (pp.29 & 33). Peasants have used biofuels (life-energy) for thousands of years and as small-scale fuel production integrated with food production for use in household and local energy supplies. Large-scale fuel production for export demand with huge plantations of monocrops is not biofuel but agrofuel, using oil-based pesticides and fertilisers, exactly like industrial agriculture. It's widely known industrial agriculture is a major contributor to climate

change, and is eroding the world's soils which contain more than twice the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. As Edward Goldsmith said in an article in issue 10 of *Pacific Ecologist*, much of this soil carbon will be released to the atmosphere in the next decades, unless there's a rapid switch to sustainable, largely organic agricultural practices. Agrofuel production can only exacerbate climate change, extending the agricultural frontier and is clearly unsustainable on this count alone, as the article *Agroenergy Myths and Impacts* reports (pp.6–9).

How has this been overlooked by the UK, EU, and US governments, which claim agrofuel production is 'sustainable'? Even the New Zealand government's Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority in June 2008 warmly welcomed 'bioethanol' from Brazil being sold in New Zealand, ahead of legislation intended to require the sale of bioethanol-blended petrol there. "Brazilian bioethanol is environmentally sustainable," said EECA's Ms Yeaman. "It does not affect world food prices" (p.44). Later in 2008, the newly elected New Zealand government removed the mandatory obligation, approved by the former Labour government in coalition with the Green Party.

The new government in New Zealand said it's keen to encourage local biofuel production but removed the requirement for biofuels to make up 2.5% of total petrol sales by 2012, being concerned "much biofuel" would be imported without an environmental standard. To be fair, the former Labour/Green coalition intentions were probably good, as were EECA's but the reality is, with or without standards, no agrofuel/biofuel imports are sustainable from Brazil, other Latin American countries, any African country or South East Asian country.

Brazil is a special case, as its government under the ambitious

President Lula has gone out of its way to persuade the world about the 'sustainability' of its 'bioethanol' and has set up a strategic regional partnership in an Agroenergy Plan with the US. It also confuses the unwary, promoting what it calls 'social seal' certificates, which actually have negative impacts on peasant and indigenous communities (p.24). As Padre Tiago Thorlby says (from p.28), to say Brazilian ethanol is 'clean, sustainable' is an attack on nature and a crime against those expelled from the land. Academics who have never set foot in sugarcane fields are on a roadshow travelling the world selling Brazil's ethanol, he says. "These academics have never seen the sugarcane invading the forest, burning the mangroves, destroying the fauna, poisoning the rivers."

It's extraordinary that most rich countries governments seem blind to the havoc and misery agrofuels are causing in the third world, on top of climate stresses. Great expectations are held for a second generation of agrofuels being developed, using 'biomass', cellulosic fibres, including crop residues, even though the earth's plant biomass is rapidly dwindling. The US Department of Energy says: "Almost all the arable land on Earth would need to be covered with the fastest growing known energy crops, to produce

the amount of energy currently consumed by fossil fuels annually," (p.48). Unsurprisingly, critics say second generation agrofuels are likely to accelerate biodiversity loss in a corporate grab on all plant matter and reduce carbon storage in forests, among other serious dangers (pp.45–53). It seems scarcely believable such environmentally damaging projects can be contemplated.

The unbelievable has already happened with first generation biofuels. Now land in famine countries is being used for agrofuels, and indigenous areas are invaded by agrofuel production, protected areas for an elephant sanctuary are allocated for agrofuel production, and orangutans and other creatures are threatened with extinction with expanding fuel plantations destroying their forest homes. If we are to prevent ecocide, the death of life, with increasing destruction of nature to fuel our cars, it's time to decommission the car in defence of nature and the human rights to food and water. A sustainable bailout of the sick, unsustainable global economy in the US (p.64) and elsewhere would help facilitate the movement away from the private car, replacing car production with production to greatly enhance public transport, creating millions of sustainable jobs. ■ Kay Weir



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