

How to Avoid Ecocide at the Petrol Pump

Contributed by Kay Weir
12 February 2009

"Most rich countries governments seem blind to the havoc and misery agrofuels are causing in the third world, on top of climate stresses, including increasing health and drought problems."

The author is Editor of the Pacific Ecologist magazine based in New Zealand.

Sustainability is a vital new objective of governments and many people. If we don't become sustainable, we know humanity's future prospects are dim. Yet without redirection at national and international levels away from the current destructive mode of development, which is causing growing crises in climate, food and energy security, our efforts to reach the promised sustainable land are likely to be confused and perpetuate the very unsustainable pattern we wish to transform.

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 development banks and rich countries, 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 so far rich countries have been unwilling to directly reduce energy consumption and we are unable to source biofuels within our own countries to support 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' advisers 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.

With climate now changing through greenhouse gas emissions, largely from rich countries, tropical third world countries are being hit hardest and soonest while most contribute least to the problem. It does seem selfish that in such already stressful circumstances, rich countries are now exploiting third world resources, land, water and their people to produce "sustainable biofuels" for the rich world's cars, which are a luxury, not a necessity of life. It is simply criminal that countries known to be drought and famine countries in sub-Saharan Africa are now being used to grow "biofuels," greatly increasing suffering and hunger in these countries. 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. The moratorium statement is available via the African Biodiversity Network and you can add your organisation's name to this moratorium through agrofuelsafrica@gmail.com.

Third world peoples suffering the effects of the "biofuel" boom say the word "biofuels" is incorrect. 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 that industrial agriculture is a major contributor to climate change, and is eroding the world's soils which carbon-wise contain more than twice the amount of atmospheric carbon. As pre-eminent ecologist Edward Goldsmith, said in his article "Feeding the World Under Climate Change," 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. So agrofuel production can only exacerbate climate change, extending the agricultural frontier and is clearly unsustainable on this count alone. A report from Brazil, "Agroenergy Myths & Impacts in Latin America," from the Network for Social Justice and the Pastoral Lands Commission, describes this in great detail.

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 here. “Brazilian bioethanol is environmentally sustainable,” said EECA’s Ms. Yeaman. “It does not affect world food prices.” Later in 2008, the newly elected NZ 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 [gasoline] sales by 2012, being concerned “much biofuel” would be imported without an environmental standard. The former Labour/Green coalition intentions were probably good, but the reality is, no “sustainability clause” or regulations can make the unsustainable sustainable and 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 Luiz Inacio Da Silva 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 fuel” certificates, which actually have negative impacts on peasant and indigenous communities. As Padre Tiago Thirlby, of the Pastoral Lands Commission, who works in a sugarcane zone in Pernambuco, Brazil says, 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, but most rich countries governments seem blind to the havoc and misery agrofuels are causing in the third world, on top of climate stresses, including increasing health and drought problems. Great expectations are held for a second generation of agrofuels being developed, using “biomass,” cellulosic fibers, including crop residues, even though the earth’s plant biomass is rapidly dwindling. Dr Steven Chu, new US Secretary of Energy, who seems to live in a fictional world where hunger, poverty and drought do not exist in Africa or Latin America, is reported to have said “there is quite a bit” of arable land suitable for rainfed crops, and Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa are areas best suited for biomass generation. The US Department of Energy reports: “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.” 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. It seems scarcely believable such environmentally damaging projects can be contemplated.

The unbelievable has already happened with first generation biofuels, all for the rich world’s cars. Now land in famine countries is being used for agrofuels; sustainable, indigenous people’s areas are invaded by agrofuel plantations; protected areas for an elephant sanctuary in Ethiopia are allocated for agrofuel production; and orangutans and other creatures are threatened with extinction in Borneo, Sumatra, Kalimantan, with expanding fuel plantations destroying their forest homes. If we are to prevent ecocide, the annihilation of life, with increasing destruction of nature to fuel our cars, it’s clear we must avoid the ethanol petrol pump like the plague and dispense with the car! It’s time to decommission the car in defence of nature and the human rights to food and water. Yes, it is possible President Obama! We can get out of our cars to become pilgrims of sustainability in defence of life! And, a sustainable bailout of the sick, unsustainable global economy in the US, and everywhere else would help facilitate the movement away from the private car, to production of bicycles of many types and replace car production with production to greatly enhance public transport, creating millions of sustainable jobs.

Kay Weir is editor of Pacific Ecologist, pacificecologist.org published in Wellington, New Zealand.