Can green replace gold when it comes to REDD?

Chris Meyer sounded cautiously optimistic on the phone a few days ago. He’s had plenty of time to reflect on the two-week UN climate negotiations in Warsaw in November.

Those talks yielded only modest progress on a range of policy proposals to mitigate global warming in advance of the next climate summit in Paris in 2015. In fact, the news from Warsaw was often downbeat. Japan begged off its carbon-emission reduction pledge because of its hobbled nuclear power industry; the conservative Australian prime minister vowed to repeal the country’s carbon tax.

But Meyer has been buoyed by a growing consensus that Warsaw pumped new life into a flailing UN policy that is the focus of his work with the Environmental Defense Fund – REDD, “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.”

Meyer is EDF’s policy liaison between indigenous communities in Central and South America and climate-change policy makers at national and international levels. While REDD is often derided as too impractical to implement, Meyer is among those who see it as a possible way to enable forest conservation while providing economic alternatives to tropical communities.

“I think we’re hitting a tipping point with REDD,” Meyer told me. “A lot of countries are committing millions of dollars a year to REDD -- the U.K, the United States, Germany, Norway. To invest all this money and then not link it to something bigger in the future, where an international climate structure is built, is very unlikely.”

Don’t just take Meyer’s word for it. A range of environmental journalists and academics monitoring the Warsaw negotiations agreed with policy analysts at the Brookings Institute who wrote that REDD “emerged as one of the major success stories out of Warsaw.”

Before we wander a bit into the weeds of policy recommendations, let’s review the goals and ambitions behind REDD.

Tropical forests are incomparably important to our lives on earth. They pull greenhouse gases from the air and store them, thus slowing the rate of global warming. They play a powerful role in the water cycle, thus creating clouds that create weather around the world. They harbor and sustain the majority of the earth’s biodiversity, thus providing shelter and habitats to countless species of plants, insects, birds, and animals, many of which we’ve yet to even identify.

Yet tropical forests, mostly located in the poorer countries and communities that ring the center of the globe, are under constant pressure from interests representing petroleum extraction, gold mining, cattle ranching and palm-oil agricultural. Steadily warming temperatures also appear to be threatening the vitality of tropical forests.

And we need to add one more often overlooked element. Global deforestation itself – and the burning or decomposition of felled trees – actually contributes greenhouse gas emissions on par with fuel burned in cars, trucks, trains and airplanes. The EPA estimates that 17 percent of carbon emissions comes from deforestation.

So protecting these vast and valuable forests indefinitely – the primary goal of REDD – is easy to understand. If it works, money would flow from developed countries to tropical countries, and individual communities, as compensation for avoiding deforestation.

Yet complexity arises when you start to debate how best to provide such protections.

Policy makers don’t have the answers yet, Meyer noted, But Warsaw pushed things in the right direction. “It’s like we’re building a house,” he said. “We put in the foundation years ago. Now we’re putting up the walls and putting in the plumbing.”

Steve Schwartzman is a colleague of Meyer’s at EDF where he is director of tropical forest policy. He offered an overview of the REDD progress made in Warsaw.

“The parties decided on basic technical principles for countries to be able to be compensated for reducing their deforestation,” Schwartzman said in late November on the radio program Living on Earth. “So they decided what countries need to do to show that they’re monitoring and measuring and verifying their forests, their forest carbon stocks, and the emissions from those, and how to set reference levels, which is the basis for getting results-based compensation.”

In talking with Meyer in mid-November before he left for Warsaw, he used Peru as an example of how this might work: “Illegal gold mining is contributing to Peru losing a half-percent of its forests each year. Let’s say they send out rangers to cut back on that mining and reduce deforestation to one-tenth of 1 percent. That difference amounts to Peru’s commitment to REDD. It can then register the amount of forest saved and sell it in the future as a carbon offset to a developed country.”

These are all critical elements of REDD that deal with the supply side of the equation. But the demand side is where things get difficult. As yet, there are no international agreements on the structure of buying carbon offsets. In their absence, what is going to compel countries or corporations to buy such offsets? And if investments do come, will they be enough to compensate tropical countries on par with the value of buried oil or minerals beneath so many square miles of tropical forests?

“So far there is no single compliance of a regulated market that actually accepts credit for reducing deforestation,” Schwartzman said on the radio. “It’s very important for governments like Norway, Germany, the U.K. and the United States to have committed public-sector funding for these things. But we’ve seen in the past that counting on public-sector funding over time on a large scale for an ecosystem services program is typically pretty dicey.”

That’s why Meyer is looking first to California.

“One of the most important things that could happen this year on the demand side,” Meyer said, “would be for the California system of emissions trading to consider new rules to allow international REDD offsets into their system.”

If such a change came about, Meyer said, a California corporation seeking to stay within its carbon emissions limits could look for a trading partner beyond state borders – perhaps in a tropical country with an enormous swath of tropical forest that meets REDD’s new supply-side requirements.

“There is no silver bullet in addressing climate change,” Meyer said. “That understanding has helped many of us look at REDD more realistically, as one program among many. Getting incorporated into the California system could be a model to show how REDD can really work.”

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