



A few thoughts on COP26 now that the dust has settled...

COP26 did not deliver the emissions reductions commitments from governments necessary to ensure that we don't exceed 1.5°C of warming: even after this latest round of negotiations in Glasgow, we are now on track for 2.4° degrees of warming, which would cause catastrophic impacts. But many commentators have nonetheless expressed a degree of relief at the Glasgow outcomes, mainly because commitments to reduce emissions are at least trending in the right direction (before Glasgow we were on course for a whopping 3°C of warming) and it is still possible to avert total disaster if governments continue to improve their emissions reductions commitments. Assuming they stick to those commitments, which is a big "if." It is an indication of just how disappointing climate negotiations have been to date that success is defined as "we don't yet have to abandon all hope."

In terms of forests, the talks did not get off to an encouraging start. The Glasgow Declaration on Forests and Land Use was weak, essentially renewing a failed commitment made seven years ago by the New York Declaration on Forests to end deforestation, and without addressing a host of other forest-related problems. The Declaration lost even more credibility when Indonesia reversed course the day after signing it, saying the Declaration was unfair. But in the end, the decision text that emerged from COP 26 on forests, which is more important than the Declaration, was better than expected. There was good language on the importance of "ecosystem integrity" in fighting climate change, and on Indigenous and community rights, and in both UNFCCC decisions that emerged from Glasgow, the word "protection" was used in conjunction with forests, rather than just relying on the term "conservation" as is usually the case in UN discussions. The difference between these two words seems trivial, but it isn't. Protecting forests means you are trying to secure their ecological integrity, whereas "conserving forests," in UN-speak, includes "sustainable forest management" i.e., industrial logging with reduced impact logging techniques, which is still far from sustainable and seriously degrades forests around the world. So while the two words sound similar, in this context they are in fact vastly different in their intent and implications. It is good news that the term "forest protection" has now been injected into climate discussions.

The fact that this shift in terminology was even necessary is unfortunate. At this very late stage, where we face rapidly accelerating species extinction and climate change crises which threaten the habitability of the planet, we should no longer have to point out that industrial logging of primary forests is completely unsustainable. It should be obvious that burning forests as biofuels is an utter catastrophe. It should be totally unacceptable that the UNFCCC allows a forest to be completely cleared, without counting as deforestation, simply because the plan is to allow the forest to regrow at some point – or to replace it with a monoculture plantation. We should be way past that point. We should be redirecting subsidies for extractive industries as fast as we can, along with climate funding, to Indigenous Peoples, local communities and protected areas. And yet these hugely damaging perversities remain in the system. But maybe the word "protection" is an indication that change is finally coming. Maybe, possibly, the door opened just a little bit in Glasgow. Wild Heritage will do everything we can to open it even more!

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