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Friday, 10 November, 2000, 17:46 GMT

Carbon-trading in Bolivia



Rich countries say they are protecting Bolivian wildlife

By **Tim Hirsch** in Bolivia

Governments from more than 150 countries gather in The Hague in Holland next week for a crucial conference on how the world will get to grips with global warming.

They will be trying to tie down the complex rules on how to achieve the cuts in greenhouse gas emissions agreed in principle at Kyoto three years ago.

One of the biggest arguments will be whether the planting or protection of forests can be traded off by companies in rich countries so that they do not have to reduce their own pollution so much.

While the politicians argue about the issue, some corporations are already buying up "carbon credits" in tropical forests to demonstrate how the system could work.

Trading carbon

The biggest example of this is in an area of spectacular scenery in Eastern Bolivia on the border with Brazil.

A large section of forest next to the Noel Kempff National Park was being worked by logging

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The BBC's **Tim Hirsch**

"Many environmental groups see this as a major loophole"

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companies before a consortium of two big American power corporations and the oil giant BP stepped in. They have paid nearly \$10m to buy out the loggers, and incorporate the area into the park, giving it legal protection.



Cheaper to clean up Bolivia than US industry?

In return, the corporations want to be able to claim credits for the carbon dioxide which the rescued trees will absorb from the atmosphere, and use them to achieve part of their targets for reducing emissions if and when the Kyoto agreement comes into force.

One investor, Dale Heydlauff of American Electric Power, admits this is a cheaper option than making the equivalent cuts in pollution from his own power plants in the United States.

But he says the scheme is protecting a unique range of plants and animals as well as helping to reduce the build-up of greenhouse gases.

Raising the temperature?

But the effectiveness of these "carbon sinks" is challenged by some scientists. For instance, the Hadley Centre for climate research in the UK, published research only this week suggesting that forests will speed up climate change in the future, as the soil will start to emit more greenhouse gases than the trees absorb as the temperature builds up.

And many environmental groups see this as a major loophole which could allow countries like the US to carry on polluting as before while the forest-based projects they are paying for do little or nothing to counteract their emissions.

Mark Kenber of the Worldwide Fund for Nature says this is all a distraction from the real aim of Kyoto, which was to promote cleaner technology and more efficient use of energy.

European governments agree this could

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potentially weaken the agreement on combating climate change to such an extent that it will have little effect, and they will be fighting hard at the Hague against the US, Japan and Australia which want maximum flexibility in the way targets can be achieved.

In the Bolivian forest, the investment is at least protecting the river dolphins, jaguars, caymans and countless bird species which thrive in the park. But the fear is that if this type of deal is allowed to undermine actual cuts in emissions, they and we will face a bleak future in our overheating planet.

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