



Society for Conservation Biology

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News Release

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Tropical Rainforests At Tipping Point

In a letter delivered today to Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of Denmark and Connie Hedegaard, Chair of the UN Climate Conference and former Minister For Climate and Energy, a global society of conservation scientists informed the conveners of the UN climate talks that the Amazon rainforest and other tropical forests were now in danger of being severely altered by increasing heat and drought – throwing off all calculations underpinning the December climate talks in Copenhagen and causing irreversible losses across the planet.

The President of the Society for Conservation Biology advised Rasmussen:

In recent months our peer-reviewed journal, *Conservation Biology*, and our magazine, *Conservation*, have carried articles about the rapid melting of the glaciers that supply the rivers on which twenty percent of the world's population rely for water, and what may be the first episode in a series of droughts that could turn the entire Amazon rainforest into a savannah. If that happens, the best of commitments you have discussed to date, even if met, will have been wiped away, for by growing normally that single forest sequesters roughly half the carbon dioxide that all of Europe and Japan emit each year. In 2005, one drought caused that rain forest to reverse its role for the year and emit nearly as much CO² as it usually stores. The net impact on the atmosphere was equal to that of all the CO² pollution of Europe and Japan combined. The sequestration rates of other tropical rainforests from Malaysia to Costa Rica are also declining in the face of increasing ambient heat. The ramifications of that decline and the potential loss of such forests are profound.

A global network of over 10,000 conservation professionals from 140 countries, the Society asked the Prime Minister to convey to the delegates a set of eleven Climate Change Policy Principles for international and national decision-makers. Drawn from scientific findings cited in their paper, the principles are intended "...to provide scientific and policy guidance for the meeting and for the negotiations following it". The Society said that the tasks and the treaties on conserving biological diversity and controlling climate change depend on each other and urged the Prime Minister to "highlight the essential contributions biodiversity can make to mitigating and adapting to climate change."

(MORE)

The eleven recommendations include, among others:

1. Setting a target for greenhouse gas pollutants well below today's levels, rather than above it, and getting there as soon as possible given the damage already being done;
2. Using, and not waiving, all existing laws and policy tools, such as caps, tax, aid and trade measures to reach that goal;
3. Not depending on less reliable offsets, but offering direct assistance and controls to conserve forests and other ecosystems;
4. Protecting the world's primary and older forests for their irreplaceable capacity to capture and store large quantities of carbon for centuries; and
5. Preparing to adapt to climate change by fully funding and guiding ecosystem and wildlife restoration.

Before releasing the principles and the summaries of the new research SCB sent summaries of the new research to Senate Environment Committee staff in August, and more recently briefed the staff of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, and key staff of the United Nations Environment Programme on SCB's full statement of climate policy principles.

Dominick DellaSala, the President-Elect of SCB's North America Section, and an expert on temperate rainforests said, "This dramatic new information confirms that unsustainable human demands on the Earth's dwindling primary and old-growth forests have pushed them to the wall. Additional increases in either greenhouse gas pollutants or logging levels will very shortly result in a tipping point beyond which the world's climate control center will suffer irreparable harm."

John Fitzgerald, Policy Director of SCB, added, "The Obama Administration already has an array of legal tools under the Clean Air Act, power transmission and natural resource laws that they should use to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to conserve ecosystems here and abroad. The Congress should not limit these powers to respond to science, as the House bill would. The President could also reduce the sales of coal and timber from Federal land, require faster pollution reductions, and consider vetoing any bill that would not allow his agencies to respond to new scientific findings."

The Society said the transition set out in their principles could lead to the "peaceable kingdom" of sufficient food and water and less scarcity and fear, and urged global leaders to shift resources from warring over dwindling resources to restoring them.

Further information on expert contacts listed above:

- Jeff McNeely, Ph. D., former chief scientist of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Chairman of SCB's Policy Committee and former President of the SCB Asia Section
- Dominick DellaSala, Ph.D., forest ecologist writing a book on temperate rainforests, spotted owl recovery team whistleblower, incoming President of the North American Section of SCB, testified on climate before House Natural Resources Committee
- Ed Grumbine, Ph.D., has published books and articles on US ecosystems, Asian glacier melting rates, Chinese policy responses
- Alan Thornhill, Ph. D., ecologist and Executive Director of SCB
- John M. Fitzgerald, J.D., Policy Director, SCB, former environmental policy analyst for USAID, environmental whistleblower, Congressional Subcommittee Counsel, and counsel for conservation groups.

SCB's Climate Policy Page: <http://www.conbio.org/activities/policy/ClimateChange.cfm>

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