

Climate Crimes – the other side of views

Published on February 22, 2013 | Leave a comment

Response to the film ‘Climate Crimes’ was exceedingly positive, but naturally it also prompted criticism. Considering the weight of the topic it would in fact be odd to receive unanimous response. The film has stirred unease among climate conservators in particular and has evoked a controversial debate. For this reason, I have decided to offer my view of the issues raised more elaborately. The following comment specifically refers to the blog of Georg Günsberg, <http://guensberg.wordpress.com/2013/02/12/geht-es-wirklich-um-climate-crimes-eine-kritik-zur-laufenden-doku/>

Let's get one thing straight right off the bat: I am an environmentalist devoted to climate conservation. However, I advocate for true climate conservation, and not for what is wrongfully sold in its name. This is why the film is titled ‘Climate Crimes - environmental crimes in the name of climate conservation’. It is about greenwashing and about fraud.

Of course, one can blind out the climate issue from the projects mentioned in the film altogether: palm oil cultivation, bio-gas, and hydropower for the sole purpose of energy production rather than for climate conservation. However, this would be a fatal misjudgement of what is actually happening. Climate conservation has considerably contributed to the boom of ‘green energies’ – it is the motor that spurs the green industry. On these grounds I find it safe to say that the film does by no means ‘contextualize’ incorrectly –to the contrary, it is spot-on. Climate conservation is being misused to justify the destruction of nature, the extinction of species, and the displacement of humans. When I say that climate conservation has turned into a crime, I consider this a legitimate generalization in this particular context: the film discusses solely what is wrongfully sold *in the name* of climate conservation and not what we all hopefully mean by it – or what we wish for. The opinion expressed in the blog stating that climate conservation “is sometimes being misused as an argument” is – mildly put – a distortion of reality. I base this sad conclusion on my extensive experience with the climate conservation industry as well as my participation in numerous conferences over the last few years. For ‘Climate Crimes’ I spent hours interviewing NGO representatives, politicians, and lobbyists. Almost like a mantra, they all demand the same: “Renewables need to be promoted. For climate’s sake this needs to be done at all costs.” I do not share this opinion.

Consider firms’ advertisement, politicians’ speeches, or marketing strategies of diverse funds. Everyone is trying to milk climate issues and green growth for profit. This has lead to a peculiar change of mind: the destruction of nature is suddenly accepted as long as it is said to be in line with climate conservation.

I have witnessed how climate conservation is used as a knock-out argument in the public discourse as well as within the NGO scene. River protection? But it’s good for the climate! Conservation of landscape? But the climate! Forest conservation? Climate! Contradiction? High treason!

Worst of all, climate conservation applied so far has been widely ineffective. No considerable reduction of greenhouse gas emissions has occurred. In Germany alone, 13 coal- and gas-fired power plants are currently being built or are about to be built –so much for replacing conventional power plants with green energies.

Real climate conservation first and foremost demands drastic and consistent reductions in consumption. However, in 90 per cent of cases, the talk is about the generation of additional energy – in other words: of growth. That is not going to work. The way in which climate politics is currently carried out and in which green energies are promoted can contribute nothing to the conservation of the climate. To the contrary, current practice is speeding up the destruction of nature, the extinction of species, and the displacement of humans. That is climate crimes.

The two economists interviewed for the film –Niko Paech and Tim Jackson –give us an idea of what needs to be done. On the one hand we certainly need to abandon the idea of perpetual growth. On the other hand, and much more specific, we need to establish limits. This is where we have failed, particularly regarding nature and species conservation. What we need is a land-use plan – both for global nature as well as the natural environment at our doorstep – a master plan that dictates where to built and where to conserve. We need effective spatial planning. Otherwise, predatory exploitation of nature will continue.

If you doubt me, you might believe Niko Paech. Paech is one of Germany's leading economists and growth critic. In Germany he is advocating for a blanket moratorium on land conversion; that is, not even for the expansion of renewable energies should unspoilt land be sacrificed – neither for wind nor for solar and such. With good reason: one can safely believe that an energy transition was of high importance to Paech. However, what is actually happening he believes to be awfully counterproductive.

I am sure I speak for many when I say that I do stand for a transformation of the energy system, but the way in which it is currently transforming is neither desirable nor rational. After touring with 'Climate Crimes' through Germany for a few weeks I am more than ever convinced, that we have a lot of fundamental rethinking to do. What we need is a way of conserving the climate without disregarding nature. Climate conservation is too frequently serving as an argument for the destruction of nature.

The time has come to revisit the climate debate; to sincerely reflect on what went wrong in the past and what we can do differently today. We simply cannot maintain the status quo. That would be fatal – not only for the sake of the environment, but also for the sake of the climate.

Regarding the different issues discussed in the film:

Hydropower:

I would like to introduce the issue of hydropower with a quote from the hydropower lobby: „The outlook for the hydro energy sector appears bright on the backdrop of the strong governments' support all over the world. The key drivers of the growth in installed capacity are the favourable

government policies for the clean sources of energy and concerned over global warming.” (Global Data, Water&Dams 2010).

Never before was there such a great expansion boom. As mentioned in the film, hardly any new dams were built in the 1990s. Why? Because resistance was strong and omnipresent and even the World Bank recognized that dams tend not to live up to their expectations. As a result, funding for big hydropower projects more or less stopped. This has changed completely. Former president of the World Bank Robert Zoellik revised policy concerning hydropower: global warming is posing an imminent threat and therefore, according to Zoellik, hydropower needs to be promoted. Ever since, funding for the construction of dams has picked up again. In 2010, investment was as high as 110 billion US \$ globally (in comparison: in 2010, 19 billion US \$ were invested in the expansion of solar energy); in 2011 the figure was even higher.

The examples are many and by no means restricted to Brazil and Turkey. In the Balkans – between Slovenia and Albania – 570 dams are projected, and even in Austria 60 new dams are to be built, even though most of the rivers are already regulated and damned. “That’s got nothing to do with climate conservation – it is all about economic interests”, is what we have argued for years. Also in Austria, politicians and corporations are playing the climate card in public. One only needs to consider advertisement from corporations such as Andritz, Verbund, EVN, and TIWAG.

Hydropower is advertised for saving the climate *per se*, justifying the construction of new dams such as the Belo Monte and Illisu. Belo Monte and Illisu– the two dams portrayed in the film – are representative for thousands and thousands of other, lesser-known dam projects.

We chose to elaborate on these two projects and their expected effects in particular because many people are unclear about the negative consequences of hydropower. In contrast to the destruction of rain forests for bio-fuel, the cultivation of corn, or wind power, waterpower happens underwater and is thus less obvious.

Bio-gas:

Of course, more forage maize than energy maize is cultivated – it has a much longer history. BUT: bio-gas has been the motor for rapid expansion of corn cultivation. In recent years, the area for energy maize cultivation has grown by 200.000 hectares annually! Furthermore, these areas continue to grow, though not as quickly as before. Land is still being converted in order to ultimately gain bio-gas. Once again: bio-gas gained from corn does not benefit the climate in the slightest. This is also the conclusion of the latest Leopoldina study, an English version of which can be downloaded here:

http://www.leopoldina.org/uploads/tx_leopublication/201207_Stellungnahme_Bioenergie_LAY_en_final.pdf

The film reveals the consequences of the bio-gas boom – or you just visit northern Germany or Bavaria and see for yourself. Let me tell you: it is very impressive.

Bio-gas from waste is desirable, but is immaterial in the overall production of bio-gas and is thus not mentioned in the film.

What I find particularly daring is the opinion about palm oil plantations on Borneo expressed in the blog: it states that climate conservation is not the driver of the current expansion of plantations. This stands in stark contradiction to both the facts and my experiences there. Why do you think palm oil is contained in every litre of diesel? It is admixed in order to reduce the climate footprint of transportation. This boost in demand for palm oil naturally has an impact on producing countries; that is: the strain on land is increasing. Palm oil is also contained in way to many foods, cosmetics, etc. But the market is fairly saturated. The boom of bio-fuel has once again made the cash tills ringing – and nature disappearing.

I believe that climate policy has failed, or is at least well on the way to failing. This is unfortunate because the expectations were high: green technology was supposed to save us; save biodiversity, the world economy, and even the entire planet. I apologize for doubting and fighting these easy solutions. Yet, civil society has the responsibility to question mainstream, even if it comes from one's own ranks. This may be uncomfortable. But after all, we do not need to get elected like politicians have to.

It is absurd to pursue climate conservation without factoring in nature. But this is exactly what is happening and what the film is trying to draw attention to. Considering the ongoing discussions in Germany, it is succeeding in doing so. The film resonates with many and, in the words of Hubert Weiger, chairman of Germany's biggest environmental organization BUND, after the film's screening in Berlin: "This film was overdue."

To conclude I would like to quote economist Niko Paech:

„What is currently happening not only in the name of climate conservation, but also in the name of green growth, I would call a kind of rampage against nature and hence against the last bit of ecological reason”

This, in my opinion, hits it right on the spot.