

A DOCUMENTARY BY ULRICH EICHELMANN

# CLIMATE CRIMES

Climate Change didn't even get a chance.  
We got there first.

*"This film will shake things up. Hopefully."*

Christian Rathner, Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF)

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# Lead

‘They say they are protecting the climate. But in fact they just are destroying our nature!’

Mega dams in Amazonia and Mesopotamia; palm-oil plantations are destroying the last forests of orang-utans; corn monocultures are encroaching even upon nature reserves in Germany. The fight against global warming is supposed to save our planet. Instead, it is speeding up the destruction of our planet’s last jewels.

Climate Crimes tells the story of unique landscapes, rare species, and humans living in harmony with nature. It is a journey to the dubious sources of green energies – with an alarming conclusion. It is a film about global greenwashing.



The Balbina Dam in Brazil is emitting more greenhouse gases than a coal-fired power plant of the same capacity. Photo: Ulrich Eichelmann

# Exposé

The fight against global warming is supposed to save our planet. Most importantly, the emission of carbon dioxide needs to be reduced. At the annual United Nation Climate Change Conference, politicians, economists, and representatives of the civil society discuss the best practice. In spite of many differences, they share one idea: in order to stop global warming, renewable energies need to be massively promoted. Future energies need to be clean, sustainable and green. A global change towards a 'green economy' is thought to facilitate perpetual economic growth AND a healthy natural environment.

Sounds reasonable – but is it really?  
If we continue on this apparently green path, where will it lead us?

In trying to answer these questions, 'Climate Crimes' had a closer look at so-called sustainable energy projects: hydropower in the Brazilian Amazon region and in Mesopotamia, palm-oil plantations for the production of bio-diesel in Indonesia, and the production of bio-gas in Germany, which are destroying even natural reserves. The film documents a journey to the dubious sources of green energies – with an alarming conclusion.

After more than 2.5 years of filming, one thing is more obvious to me than ever: climate conservation is misused as an advertising slogan in order to push through projects that would otherwise be difficult to get legal approval. What is sold to us as 'green energy' is in fact speeding up the destruction of nature and biodiversity without actually helping the climate. This kind of false labelling has devastating consequences.



Xingu River, Brazil: This is where the Belo Monte Dam is planned to be build. Photo: Ulrich Eichelmann

## Key facts:

Running Time: 54 minutes

Quality: HDTV

Shooting Time: February 2010 to May 2012

Languages: German, English

Production, Concept, and Text: Ulrich Eichelmann

Camera: Agata Skowronek, Christian Kuen, Christoph Walder

Music: César Rosón

# Scenes and Issues

## Waterpower

### Amazonia – Brazil

The biodiversity of the Amazon region is without par. It is home to Aras', pink dolphins, hoatzins, and jaguars. The Amazon boasts more than half of all our planet's plant and animal species.



The living environment of the Kayapo indigenous tribe is threatened by the construction of the Bela Monte Dam. Photo: Ulrich Eichelmann

At the Climate Change Conference in Cancun, Mexico, at the end of 2010, Brazil's government is showing off its country's impressive biodiversity. Global warming is threatening this, they say – so, renewable energies need to be promoted. The talk is primarily about dams in the Amazon region. The spate of construction is intended to start on the Xingu River, which is a tributary of the Amazon. A river loop – 100 kilometres in length – is the Xingu's unique feature: the Volta Grande constitutes one of Amazonia's greatest natural wonders, characterized by thousands of islands and cataracts. However, not for very much longer: this is where the world's third-largest dam is projected – the Belo Monte Dam. The project would displace more than 25,000 people and would endanger an unknown number of plant and animal species. For years, affected indigenous tribes, such as the Kayapo and the Arara people have offered resis-

tance. In their efforts, they are supported by Austrian Bishop Erwin Kräutler who was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize for his engagement in 2011. Among other things the film 'Climate Crimes' shows how one of the biggest nesting sites of turtles is threatened by the construction of the Belo Monte Dam. Some 30,000 turtles come to the Xingu's sand islands to lay their eggs – a miracle of nature. However, this miracle might soon cease to exist because if the dam is actually built, the sand islands will disappear – and with them, the turtles. This is because the dam not only holds back the water, but also the sand necessary to replenish the islands.

Belo Monte is just the beginning. There are plans for power projects on almost every river of the Amazon basin – more than 60 mega-dams and hundreds of medium-sized ones. The consequences are expected to be devastating: many thousands of people will lose their homes and livelihoods; ecological repercussions can hardly be estimated. Janson Zuanon, one of Brazil's leading fish experts, predicts the extinction of approximately 1,000 species. That is the equivalent to ten per cent of all freshwater fish species on Earth. According to Bishop Kräutler, a go-ahead for the construction of the dams would be the final blow to the Amazon region. In an interview for the film the Bishop states, that once the dams are built "all we can do is sing a requiem for the Amazon".

### Mesopotamia – Turkey

What the Amazon region is to the planet's nature, Mesopotamia is to humankind's cultural heritage. The land between Euphrates and Tigris is seen as the cradle of Western civilisation. No other region is so closely connected with our cultural history.



Hasankeyf along the Tigris River: at risk of being flooded by the Ilisu Dam. Photo: John Wreford

However, also this region is threatened by a dam project: the Ilisu hydropower plant in the Southeast of Turkey. One of the world's oldest city – Hasankeyf – is to be drowned in the projected Ilisu reservoir. Hasankeyf's foundations on the banks of the Tigris were laid millennia ago. In the course of time, the people have dug some 6,000 caves into the cliffs, many of which were inhabited until the 1970ies.

Alongside Hasankeyf, another 100 villages will be inundated. 65,000 people will lose their homes. The Ilisu power plant is one of the world's most controversial power projects. Enduring opposition has caused Germany, Austria, and Switzerland to withdraw their investments from the project in 2009, and with them European banks and construction companies.

Solely the Austrian supplier Andritz AG has remained loyal to Turkey and continues to take part in the construction.

The Turkish government has ignored the concerns of the three states and – despite all resistance – carries on with the construction of the dam. However, what is happening upstream the dam is only half the story: while Hasankeyf and many more villages will drown in the Ilisu reservoir, an entire region 1,000 kilometres downstream of Hasankeyf will fall dry due to the Ilisu Dam.

### Swamps of Mesopotamia – Iraq

Near the city of Basra, where the Tigris unites with the Euphrates River, is where the true cradle of Western civilisation is located. Here, some 6,000 years ago, the Sumerians developed writing, the first legal system, and the basic methods of agriculture. Legend has it that this was the Garden of Eden – a paradise. Still today, the region is cherished as one of the world's most precious natural and cultural environments. In October 2011, it became our filming location for 'Climate Crimes'. We discovered a unique swampland, which today is home to the Marsh Arabs. Like their ancestors, the Sumerians, they build their houses of reeds – on tiny islands in the midst of the swamps.

Euphrates and Tigris are the lifelines of this landscape. Originally, the two rivers would swamp an area the size of Belgium each spring. Up to the 1980ies, people were making a living from water buffalos, fishing, and hunting. After the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein ordered the marshes to be dried out as a revenge for the Marsh Arabs' opposition during the war. As a result, over 90 per cent of the swampland turned into a desert. This went on until 2003. After Saddam's capture, people tore holes into the dams and the water could flow where it always had. The people returned, rebuilt their huts, and raised their cattle. Hundreds of

thousands of migrant birds can once again rest on the swamps during their journey from Asia to Africa and back.



Marsh Arabs in a Mudhiff, a guesthouse made out of reed.  
Foto: Agata Skowronek

Today, this unique environment is threatened once more. Only this time the threat comes from the Ilisu Dam, which is designed to hold back the spring flood with the result that water would no longer reach the swamps. Desertification is once again looming. If the Ilisu dam will be built, the Mesopotamian Swamps would be no more. It seems like we are about to destroy the roots of our civilization once and for all – in the name of progress and climate conservation.

### Hydropower

- 500 – 750 million people worldwide are affected by the consequence of dam constructions.
- Dams are producing just as much climate-damaging emissions as the entire air traffic.
- Each year, over 100 billion US dollars are invested in the construction of new hydropower plants (solar: 19 billion US dollars).
- By 2020, the construction of over a thousand new mega-dams is projected.
- Rivers are counted among the most endangered habitats on earth.
- The Belo Monte and Ilisu Dam are being built – but resistance persists.

## Bio-gas

### Germany

Germany is a world-wide leader in eco-friendly electricity. Twenty per cent of Germany's electricity comes from renewable sources. Particularly in the fields of wind and solar energy, Germany takes an international lead.

But in the shadow of these highly visible energy plants, another branch has been growing – almost unnoticed but very profitable. The raw material is grown in fields: corn.

For this reason an increasing amount of corn has been cultivated in Germany. In recent years, the annual increase in corn fields has been 200,000 hectares. By the end of 2011, 7,000 bio-gas plants were in operation. Three more are being completed every day.



Filmed in a German nature reserve: corn monoculture instead of biodiversity. Photo: Ulrich Eichelmann

Cornfields are ecological deserts: a hostile living environment that supports very few species. Even populations of species that can survive virtually anywhere – such as lapwings, larks, partridges, yellowhammers, and European hares – are dropping dramatically. They cannot find enough nutrition in the cornfields.

For 'Climate Crimes', we visited a unique nature reserve in the Province of Brandenburg – the Chorin-Schorfheide Biosphere Reserve north of Berlin. In the Chorin reserve, one can meet animals that have long disappeared elsewhere: posing storks and cranes, singing whinchats, and scuttling European hares.

But the idyllic image belies reality. In midst of the nature reserve, farmers have started to cultivate corn for bio-gas. This even affects Germany's rarest eagle, the lesser spotted eagle. By foot, the eagle searches for food on meadows and uncultivated land. However, such land is becoming rarer since much of it has fallen victim to corn cultivation.

Because of green energy, Germany's rarest eagle – the lesser spotted eagle – too, appears to have no future in this country. Corn is closing in on its hunting grounds. Eagles cannot feed their brood with corn. Who actually benefits from bio-gas production? Is it agriculture?

We visited farmer Renate Rahn in Schleswig-Holstein, the most northern province of Germany. Because she can no longer compete with bio-gas farmer for land, her dairy farm has suffered from the consequences of the bio-gas boom. Now she has to buy forage for her cows, such as soy beans. Renate Rahn points to the absurdity of rainforest being cleared elsewhere to plant the soy beans she now needs to import as a result of local bio-gas production.

Germany's biggest bio-gas plant Klaarsee, near the east-German town of Penkun, has a capacity of 20,000 megawatt. It supplies 50,000 households with electricity. That is impressive. Even more impressive is the plant's appetite. Day after day it devours one thousand tons of corn. For a year's supply, ten to twelve thousand hectares of corn are needed.

Bio-gas plants are land-eaters. Comparing it with wind energy demonstrates how inefficient bio-gas actually is: for the same electricity output, a wind park requires only 400 hectares – just five percent of the land surface required for bio-gas.

In a final analysis, however, the output turns out to be even less. If you deduct the energy used for the production of fertilizer and pesticides, for ploughing and harvesting, the bottom line is nearly zero. If the climate balance also takes into account the emissions created by ploughing green fields, the overall result is negative. Bio-gas damages the planet's climate.

In conclusion, bio-gas produced from corn does not help the climate, but degrades nature and harms farmers.

#### Bio-gas

- By the end of 2011, there were 7,000 bio-gas plants in Germany
- Each year, 1,000 more plants are being completed.
- In 2011, Germany was unable to meet its own population's demand for grain for the first time in a long time. Too many farmers had converted their fields for the more profitable production of corn for bio-gas.
- In the last few years, biodiversity in these landscapes has declined dramatically. Even species that can survive virtually anywhere – such as lapwings, cuckoos, quails, swallows, and larks – have in many places disappeared.

## Bio-diesel

### Indonesia

Our road traffic literally stinks. Our mobility is one of the main causes of global warming. Cars, trucks, airplanes, and ships are responsible for approximately 25 per cent of our global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. For this reason, politicians sell bio-fuel

as an alternative to fossil fuels. In the European Union, by 2020, at least ten per cent of the fuel in our tanks should be from plant products – applied climate conservation without changing our mobility habits. The apparent ease of this is tempting. In the EU, about 80 percent of bio-fuel is bio-diesel. It is extracted from oleiferous seeds. The Oil from oil palms is a common substance for bio-diesel. Palm oil is used in food and cosmetic products, but in recent years, Europe's, India's and China's thirst for bio-diesel – due to the booming green fuel market – has been driving the sprawl of palm plantations.

Palm oil is booming in Indonesia. In spite of international protests, 2 million hectares of rain forest are cleared each year in Indonesia – a shameful world record.



Rain forests cleared for plantations: orang-utans are not only losing their habitat but are regarded as pests and are persecuted. Photo: Johannes Jenito

Indonesia's forests are home to orang-utans. These primates live only here and on neighbouring Sumatra.

However, oil palm plantations not only rob orang-utans of their habitat, they also pose another danger: the owners regard them as pests and persecute them because they damage the young seedlings. While conservationists struggle to save as many animals as possible, hundreds of orang-utans are being killed on the plantations each year. The orang-utans become collateral damage of the green fuel market – victims of climate conservation. This is particularly alarming since bio-diesel is proven to not even relieve our pressure on the climate. On the contrary: because forests are burned, CO<sub>2</sub> is emitted. What's worse: In Borneo, most forests grow on peaty soils. When they are drained, these soils suddenly emit all the carbon they have accumulated over millennia.

#### Bio-diesel

- In the EU, about 80 per cent of bio-fuel is bio-diesel, 20 per cent can be allotted to ethanol (fuel admixture).
- Indonesia is planning to expand its palm oil plantation area from 7 million hectares today to 20 million hectares by 2020.
- In fall 2012, the European Commission suggested to reconsider future funding of bio-fuel. The production of bio-diesel is still unaffected by this reconsideration. Palm oil continues to be mixed with diesel.
- Each year, more than 2,500 orang-utans die from loss of habitat and persecution.

## Conclusion

The rigorous expansion of hydropower, bio-gas, and bio-diesel is speeding up the destruction of natural landscapes, the extinction of species, and the displacement of humans without actually helping the climate.

How many natural spaces do we want to preserve? Put differently: how much nature do we NOT want to destroy? Should the next generation still have the Amazon, Mesopotamia, wild orang-utans, lesser spotted eagles, and Amazon river dolphins? Should the Kayapó indigenous people and the Marsh Arabs still be able to live in their ancestral habitats?

If we want that, we need to set limits to the destruction of nature and come up with a global master plan for natural spaces without economic developments.

This won't happen without rigorous changes in our economy and society. We need to abandon the idea of perpetual growth. Admittedly, many of us will find this difficult to imagine. But let us start to face the facts. Climate conservation is often a smoke screen of eco-criminals and profiteers in politics and business. They pretend to protect the climate, but all they do is destroy our natural world. This has to stop now.

Ulrich Eichelmann  
November 2012

Further information on the issues raised in the film can be found at: [www.riverwatch.eu](http://www.riverwatch.eu)

A film recommendation on palm oil, bio-diesel and orang-utans: [www.greenthefilm.com](http://www.greenthefilm.com)