

Climate of Collaboration

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By Melanie Lenart

It sounds like such a good idea, giving forests and other natural systems credit for the carbon dioxide they collect. And it is.

With help from the oceans, natural systems pull down more than half the carbon dioxide we release around the world in the burning of coal, oil, gas and forests. Given that carbon dioxide is the main player behind the ongoing global warming, that amounts to an incredible climate service.

Trying to account for this real service in legal language, though, is a daunting task that can all too easily backfire. Recent conversations with people working to account for these services in the proposed international climate treaty made me wonder if it's even possible to close all the legal loopholes when developing a one-size-fits-all document for the world.

That's why international leaders meeting this month for the Copenhagen climate talks should take note of local collaborative efforts, such as those that have supported natural systems in Arizona.

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is one such effort. About 40 groups remain involved in this grand plan to protect sensitive areas around Tucson from unchecked sprawl.

The movement started in 1997 as a conflict over the pygmy owl, an endangered species whose few remaining members sometimes visited a site slated for construction of a high school. In time, it evolved into a county-wide effort to guide development, with input from hundreds of people and groups.

Meetings could get contentious, and even included fistfights on at least one occasion. At some point in the process of holding 600 public meetings, though, a consensus emerged. People came to agree that development could and should be curtailed around sensitive areas with high biological diversity.

By 2004, two-thirds of those voting on the issue backed the plan — to the tune of providing \$174 million in bonds to buy and preserve open lands, and natural corridors to connect them. Chalk one up for collaboration.

Around the same time the Tucson community confronted the pygmy owl, environmentalists and loggers in northern Arizona were facing off over the Mexican spotted owl. Its 1993 listing as an endangered species inspired a lawsuit that shuttered Apache and Navajo county sawmills for 16 months in the mid-1990s, decimating logging income.

In 1997, a group of locals that would later become the White Mountains Natural Resources Working Group began meeting. Third-generation loggers, Forest Service folks, environmentalists, and anybody else who wanted to come to the table all sat down together to try to work things out.

They spent years getting to know each other, meeting every month or so, focusing on the science behind the debate.

In 2002, when the Rodeo-Chediski fire burned nearly half a million acres of White Mountain forests, the group was ready with a collaborative agreement they successfully argued could reduce the risk of future conflagrations.

After helping to secure federal funds, the group guided efforts to make forests more fireproof by culling the smaller trees, which can whisk fire into the treetops, while leaving in place the trees bigger than 16 inches in diameter, which have thicker bark and higher branches to guard them from fire.

These collaborative efforts in Arizona and others like them could inform climate negotiations. Here's an idea – for every international project claiming money for carbon credits, a collaborative group of locals should weigh in on decisions.

And such local groups should give any citizen the chance to participate, something members of the White Mountains group considered essential to its success.

Much as involvement of locals kept the Arizona projects from being focused on one species, local oversight of international carbon projects would limit the risk of that carbon counters would ignore other values of these natural systems – including as a place for local people to live and make a living.

It's not a quick fix to follow a collaborative path honoring locals as wisdom bearers. Getting people to collaborate and reach consensus together takes time. But having local groups oversee international carbon projects may be the best way to keep it real when supporting forests and other natural systems for their climate services.

Author: Melanie Lenart is an environmental scientist and writer based in Tucson, Arizona. Her related article on efforts to fit wetlands into the pending climate treaty is available at <http://www.nature.com/climate/2009/0912/full/climate.2009.125.html>.