

Deforestation prevented, in part, by democracy: study

September 24 2010, By Roelof Kleis

Democratic countries suffer less from deforestation. That seems logical enough. But forests also do well under a strong dictatorship. This remarkable conclusion was reached by Wageningen environmental scientists.

'This result came as a surprise to us too', responds Wageningen University Professor of Environmental Policy Tuur Mol. 'In the environmental sciences there are widely divergent views on whether democracy does or does not have an impact on the environment. Now we have found a way to approach it systematically. That is the nice thing about it.'

Mol and his Indonesian MSc student Meilanie Buitenzorgy have published their findings in the online journal *Environmental and Resource Economics*. The setup of their study was simple: they correlated the rate of [deforestation](#) in 177 countries with the degree of democracy present. What emerged was an inverted U-shaped graph in which deforestation peaks at the top, in countries that are in the throes of transition from an authoritarian regime to a fully functioning democracy.

Typical transitional countries where a great deal of forest felling is going on are the eastern European countries, China, Korea and a number of Latin American countries. Countries with little deforestation and a fully-fledged democracy include those in western Europe and the United States, Australia and New Zealand. But the curve also indicates that countries ruled by a strong authoritarian regime succeed in keeping

deforestation under control too. So dictators are good for the environment as well.

This newly identified correlation is striking, says Mol, but quite easily explained. 'In autocracies the state protects forests vigilantly. In fully-fledged democracies it is the civil society organizations that play that role. But exactly in that transition phase neither the old nor the new institutions are fully functioning', Mol explains. The upshot of which is deforestation.

A job for economists

According to Mol, this throws a spanner in the works for environmental economists and social scientists. 'Economists have done many studies on the relation between economic growth and environmental degradation. The upside-down U appears to be present there too. We show that there is a similar relation between deforestation and democracy. Not only that, but the link is actually stronger.'

So for Mol, the message is: 'Economists, you focus far too much on the economy. There is more to explaining the state of the environment than the economy'. And that, he says, is a useful contribution to the academic tribal war. 'I expect this article to be widely cited. This opens up a whole new line of research. We have only looked at deforestation, but you can research many other indicators too.' Because besides [democracy](#), Mol believes that other factors play a role, such as education, the size of a country and the size of its rural population. This is of more than academic interest, according to Mol. It has practical value too. 'The IMF, for example, gives a lot of funding to anti-deforestation programmes. In such cases you should look not just at improving incomes but also at democratization and participation. We provide the argument for this.'

Provided by Wageningen University

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