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Are corporations hog-tying conservation groups in CAFTA

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Macaws and effect in Central America.

A year ago, President Bush signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Since then, the controversial plan has inspired protests across the U.S. and in Central America. And while past trade agreements have been ratified by Congress in less than two months, the Bush administration has delayed the vote on CAFTA multiple times, unable to rally the support needed for it to pass.

The latest vote is scheduled for this month, but CAFTA's passage is by no means inevitable. Many Democrats and some Republicans, having learned from the fallout of NAFTA — for example, the loss of hundreds of thousands of U.S. manufacturing jobs — are expected to vote against it. They're taking this stand because the agreement is weak on both labor and environmental standards, and because they are beginning to realize such treaties promote not free trade, but corporate trade.

The environmental movement has also learned from NAFTA. An impressive coalition (http://www.ciel.org/Tae/CAFTA_18Feb04.html) of professional and grassroots organizations is fighting CAFTA on the basis that it “would allow foreign investors to challenge hard-won environmental laws and regulations, and fails to include adequate measures to ensure environmental improvement throughout Central America and the United States.” Members include Friends of the Earth, Earthjustice, Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, Natural Resources Defense Council, and U.S. Public Interest Research Group, among others.

Missing from this fight is an elite subset of the movement: the international biodiversity conservation organizations. Not one of the four major groups in this field — Conservation International, the World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and the Wildlife Conservation Society — has demonstrated the courage to oppose CAFTA, despite ample opportunity over the past year.

When asked about his organization’s position on CAFTA at a recent talk at the University of California–Berkeley, Kent Redford of WCS replied that his organization “does not engage in policy work.” (The speech, offering an indication of priorities, was titled, “Has Poverty Alleviation Abducted Conservation?”) Conservation International’s vice president for conservation and government said, “We don’t have a position.” A World Wildlife Fund representative wrote, “WWF has not been tracing CAFTA either in Central America or in our U.S. office. As a result, we don’t have a position on CAFTA ...” Nor has The Nature Conservancy stated a position.

Their silence is inexcusable. Consider the immediate threats CAFTA poses in a region that, while accounting for less than 1 percent of the world’s land mass, is estimated to hold 8 to 10 percent of the planet’s species:

- The treaty would allow international agribusiness to dump subsidized food commodities, most notably corn, at below-market prices in Central America. When this happened in Mexico under NAFTA, more than 1.5 million Mexican farmers lost their livelihoods. CAFTA may hasten agricultural price collapses, which would ultimately force small farmers off their land and — as has happened in Guatemala’s Maya Biosphere Reserve — into protected areas in search of

subsistence. CAFTA would effectively create a new underclass of displaced people: free-trade refugees.

- It would enable corporations to sue governments over *future* lost profits if local environmental laws inhibit their activities. (This expands provisions in NAFTA that corporations have taken full advantage of; in perhaps the most famous, and still pending, case, Vancouver-based Methanex sued the U.S. government for \$970 million over a California law that had banned the gasoline additive MTBE, a suspected carcinogen.) CAFTA would benefit companies like Harken Energy (/article/engler/), which has long wanted to drill offshore in Costa Rica's protected Talamanca region, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. If CAFTA passes, Harken (on whose board George W. Bush formerly served) plans to sue the government of Costa Rica for \$58 billion for the right to drill there. By comparison, the entire GDP of Costa Rica is \$38 billion.
- Most Central American countries currently prohibit the patenting of nature. But CAFTA would force them to modify their intellectual-property laws to enable corporate bio-prospecting (what many call bio-piracy), effectively allowing corporations to steal traditional indigenous knowledge. CAFTA would also facilitate the privatization of critical services like water, health, education, and telecommunications.
- Although CAFTA does contain an "environmental" chapter, it merely makes recommendations like the "promotion" of clean production technologies. Corporate lobbyists hail CAFTA's voluntary mechanisms (http://trade.businessroundtable.org/trade_2005/cafta_dr/environment.html) as the "most advanced ... ever included in a trade agreement." But as one Salvadoran environmental activist put it, "They have added a bit of green sweetener to a truly toxic stew."

In the face of these outrageous threats, how to explain the silence of these four groups, which are so well-endowed in budgets and policy staff?

We might look to an important paradigm shift. In the heady days after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, all of the major biodiversity groups embraced the concept of sustainable development. But over the past few years, the conservation pendulum

has been swinging back to a stricter preservationist ideology. Little by little, the international conservation organizations have shifted to market-based approaches to conservation.

A decade after Rio, at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (<https://grist.org/article/tom1/>), these groups championed public-private partnerships. They also lauded the new reign of “ecosystem services,” whereby any aspect of the environment can be had, for a price (<http://www.katoombagroup.org/Katoomba/whoweare.htm>). It’s not that the big organizations don’t “do” policy; rather, they do only a certain kind of free-market policy work.

To facilitate the uptake of this free-market approach, international conservation groups have opened their doors to transnational corporate leaders. Today, three-quarters of Conservation International’s board and half of the slots on The Nature Conservancy’s board are given to representatives of major corporations — including Wal-Mart and Gap, Inc., two companies actively lobbying in support of CAFTA. Are these corporate dollars a Faustian bargain for the international environmental movement? Are they subtly distracting these large conservation organizations from seeing the links between political economy and environmental degradation?

In these final critical weeks of debate, we need the lobbying support of the international conservationists working in Central America. Together, the four major groups control well over half of conservation dollars available worldwide, and wield enormous influence. Their partnerships with in-country organizations make them perfectly suited to lobby both on the ground and in Washington, D.C. They could give detailed testimony about CAFTA’s impact on the regional environment. They could also lend support to the courageous Central Americans who have already spoken out vociferously against CAFTA.

Conservation International, World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and Wildlife Conservation Society: it’s time. We challenge you, with all your resources and your clout, to see beyond corporate interests. Join the many others in the environmental community who oppose this dangerous trade agreement.



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