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Guyana Offers a Model to Save Rain Forest

By ERICA GIES

In Guyana, where pristine rain forest still covers 75 percent of the land, and barely 750,000 people live in a country roughly the size of Britain, a young economist-turned-president is pushing a development model based on conservation that has earned his government international recognition in the United Nations talks on a climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol.

Faced with the possibility of climate change, the international community is starting to talk about paying for the carbon storage that living forests provide. Growing trees store carbon dioxide, but 13 million hectares, or 32 million acres, of forest are razed each year, accounting for a significant portion of annual greenhouse gas emissions, according to scientists and other experts who met for climate talks last month in Barcelona.

Guyana's minister of foreign affairs, Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett, said that the world's growing motivation to tackle climate change could mean sustainable economic opportunity for her country as well as a cost-effective investment for the world.

"The fastest way of reducing carbon emissions is keeping the forest standing," she said in an interview here in September, ahead of this month's Copenhagen conference on climate change. "All of the other measures we could take would take technology, time. But this we can do immediately. We just stop. We just stop cutting."

That recognition, and advances in satellite imaging and carbon measurements over the past decade, have made a proposal for forest preservation, known as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, or REDD, an important part of the climate treaty talks.

Guyana argues that forest conservation is critically important. If incentives are aimed only at encouraging countries with high deforestation, like its neighbor Brazil, to curtail logging, timber clearance will simply migrate from protected to unprotected countries, it says.

Pursuing that concept, President Bharrat Jagdeo last year commissioned the international management consulting firm McKinsey to help calculate deforestation's economic value to his nation — that is, the amount Guyana could earn by selling its forests for timber and using the land for agriculture. After all, said Mr. Jagdeo, a former finance minister who studied economics in Moscow, deforestation is not a result of irrationality or ignorance; people get economic benefits when they log and farm. For preservation to work, "the incentives must be at a level that will outcompete alternative activities," he said in an interview.

Critics protest that the value calculated by McKinsey — \$580 million annually over 25 years — amounts to blackmail. But Ian Craddock, a British expatriate who runs an adventure tourism company in Guyana, disagrees.

“Guyana is a small, impoverished country that’s trying to develop itself,” he said. “And if the Western world isn’t going to protect the rain forest and start coughing up money to countries like Guyana, then they’re going to have to start using their resources. Just like England did for thousands of years, just like the States is doing and Canada is doing. You can’t be hypocrites about it.”

To show that he is not looking for a handout, Mr. Jagdeo has formulated a low-carbon development strategy that outlines how income from REDD would help his country develop sustainably.

The plan calls for investment in clean industries, like organic agriculture, aquaculture, sustainable forestry, business outsourcing and ecotourism. It proposes the development of hydropower to cut fossil fuel use, and because most of the population lives along the coast, below sea level, it would direct some funds toward adaptation, strengthening sea defenses or moving people inland. Those efforts would help to counteract flooding, which has taken a 10 percent bite out of gross domestic product in recent years.

To help convince developed countries, Guyana has undertaken a pilot project, largely funded through a partnership deal signed last month with Norway. The agreement will provide Guyana \$30 million in 2010 for forest conservation and up to \$250 million by 2015, based upon its success in limiting emissions. Guyana will use the money to begin protecting its rain forests and implementing its low-carbon development strategy.

“I think the partnership between Norway and Guyana is absolutely vital in building lessons in order to have a really good REDD mechanism,” said Florence Daviet, a senior associate for the World Resources Institute, who is taking part in the climate treaty talks.

Elements of the partnership that might offer lessons for others include the setting up of a transparent financial transfer mechanism that allows Guyana to maintain sovereignty over its resources; the creation of a system to measure, monitor and report changes in forest cover; and the organization of consultations with all Guyanese, including indigenous people, to generate nationwide support.

Guyana’s pilot project is unique because it is countrywide. Support from Amerindians is particularly important because, collectively, the Amerindians are Guyana’s second-largest landowners, after the state.

Many Guyanese Amerindians express a cautious enthusiasm about the project, including the Amerindian leader Sydney Allicock. “This might be something we’ve always been looking for

because of our belief of the forest,” Mr. Allicock said. “We don’t look at the forest as just a money-making thing in terms of lumber. We look at it as life.”

The Guyana project promises to allow Amerindians to continue their traditional way of life in the forest where, Mr. Allicock said, they are an integral part of the ecosystem. When they cut trees to farm, they use the land for about three years and then let it go fallow. “You would be amazed to see after five, six years, that different types of trees that were not even there — but seeds were probably in the ground — are now able to evolve,” he said. “That sort of understanding with the forest is what we have.”

Guyana’s low-carbon development strategy and an effective REDD program would provide a rare opportunity to protect that relationship, while simultaneously offering benefits of development like better health care and education. Experience suggests the alternatives, including gold, oil and hardwood extraction, would be less benign.

Yet, whether a binding agreement can be reached at Copenhagen, on REDD or anything else, remains at best uncertain.

“The science is clear,” Mr. Jagdeo said. “Every government in the world now agrees that climate change is real, and it has a huge impact on development, and it threatens our future. The solutions are clear. Where we have become deadlocked is on the question of political will.”

The developed world is willing to acknowledge responsibility for having gotten to this point, but as yet, it has been unwilling to bear the cost of corrective action, he said. As an economist, he is most haunted by the numbers.

“It will take less than 1 percent of G.D.P. now to fix the problem, when in the future we could lose as much as 20 percent of G.D.P.,” he said.

Still, at least for Guyana, “the good news is that the framework on forests is actually doing better than many other sectors,” said Andrew Mitchell, director of the Global Canopy Program, an international rain forest research alliance based in Oxford, England. “It’s possible that we will get a good agreement on REDD in Copenhagen.”

Mr. Mitchell said he was hopeful that money would somehow be found to keep the Guyana experiment alive. Interim financing might come from the Prince’s Rainforest Project, founded by the heir to the British crown, Prince Charles, to raise money to reduce deforestation immediately, he said, adding that a market-based approach could be a game-changer for developing countries.

“The forest-owning nations, instead of receiving aid, would become suppliers of a global service that is paid for or rented by the international community,” Mr. Mitchell said. “It changes from an aid relationship into a trade relationship.”

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