

**“Living Planet” interview with Halldor Thorgeirsson  
20 April 2006**

**Deutsche Welle (DW): [...] signatories to the [Kyoto] Protocol have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least five per cent below 1990 levels. Could you tell me how likely it's looking that these targets will actually be met?**

*Halldor Thorgeirsson (HT): Well, we are quite optimistic looking at the actions that are being taken to prepare for the first commitment period. It's not easy: it's turning around a development that has been taking a long time; but from the signals that we are seeing, we think that the Kyoto targets will be met.*

**DW: Could you tell me where the most serious levels of pollution are coming from at present? What's generating them?**

*HT: What the climate Convention is looking at is what we call the greenhouse gases, the gases that contribute to global warming and most of those greenhouse gases come from the use of energy and the most important gas is carbon dioxide. The single largest source – it might surprise you – but that is production of electricity, and the heating up of houses, which is about a quarter of all the emissions.*

**DW: Deforestation is now known to be a contributor as well. Could you tell me how serious deforestation is as a contributor, compared to, let's say, industrial pollution or car exhaust fumes?**

*HT: Actually as a single source, deforestation is the second most important source after production of electricity and heating. And so at the global level, if you look at deforestation contributes about twenty per cent of all the carbon dioxide – all the greenhouse gases, rather, that come from human activity.*

**DW: That's a huge amount. I mean, do you think that's something that people are generally aware of?**

*HT: No, I wouldn't think so, and this is roughly the same amount as comes from the United States, which is a very major economy. The reason why deforestation contributes to – contributes greenhouse gases is that the trees are basically made of carbon and once those trees are either burned or cut down, that carbon is released in the form of carbon dioxide that goes into the atmosphere. And so trees can then recapture that carbon dioxide when they grow, and so carbon dioxide and carbon is cycling through the living system all the time. But by cutting down trees and preventing them from re-growing, you are actually releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.*

**DW: Tell me a little bit about the initiative whereby developing nations sell or rent rainforest to developed nations? Can you tell me how this can actually help to reduce greenhouse gases from building up in the atmosphere?**

*HT: I guess the best example of this would be from Costa Rica. Costa Rica actually went through a period where they were losing a lot of their forest cover and*

*deforestation rates in Costa Rica were quite high. Their government made an attempt to turn around this tide, to conserve the forest that was still standing and re-plant trees. They looked at the possibility of actually creating incentives for that to happen by allowing companies, individuals, societies in the north to contribute to meeting the costs of doing this and also providing livelihood for people that were depending on the forest for their livelihood. But the interest now is to broaden this approach.*

**DW: Because making money, I guess, always comes before environmental concerns, especially when we're talking about developing countries. Is this – has this been a problem in trying to persuade developing countries to buy into this idea?**

*HT: At the essence, we need to look at what is the value of a forest? And is it valuable to you, that lives next to it, or is it valuable to somebody that lives far away? And forests have a lot of different values; there are a lot of different reasons why you would want to hold onto [a] forest and conserve it. It is important for the water cycle, it's also important for climate regulation; and then also as a store of carbon. But the issue here is to then make sure that this value is translated into decisions made where [the] forest is being cut. Traditionally, forests have been looked at as non-productive land. By valuing the ecosystem services of the trees standing there in terms of climate, in terms of carbon, you can change that picture and create incentives for actually conserving the forest rather than cutting it down.*

**DW: The initiative has been described, I believe, as a “win-win” situation for everybody. But won't this actually be very expensive for the developed nations if they have to pay rent but also if they have to cover any kind of on-going management costs. How do they win through this?**

*HT: Most of these things are not known at the moment. What is happening now is that there is an interest of having the climate Convention – UNFCCC – get involved in this and to create a possibility of linking forest conservation to what we have called the carbon market. And the carbon market really puts a value on carbon. So the questions then would be is that forest conservation as a main means of dealing with climate change would be then compared to other options, and so it's not so much a question of looking in isolation of how much does it cost to re-conserve a forest, but to look at how that compares to other options of dealing with the problem. Our indications are this would be rather economical, that you can actually achieve a lot of different objectives as well, not just climate protection. As I say, it's too early to say how this will compare to other options, but it's too large a source to ignore.*

**DW: Could you tell me, is there a link between forest conservation and the Kyoto Protocol? How are the two linked?**

*Yes, there is a link here because the biggest innovation of the Kyoto Protocol is to put a ceiling on the emissions from industrialized countries, which then creates the carbon market. It puts a value on carbon. And then, if forest conservation would then be linked to the required actions by industrialized countries to meet their future Kyoto commitments, that is the link that could be created. If the industrialized*

*countries do not need to have access to the carbon market, then it would be difficult to create these incentives.*

**DW: Could you tell me how deforestation links into the clean development mechanism, which allows industrial countries to invest in environmental projects in developing countries?**

*HT: It does not link directly into the clean development mechanism, the way it is conceived now. You can gain credits by planting trees, and that is what the clean development mechanism provides, for projects that are planting trees in developing countries and the credits can be generated through that. Because the clean development mechanism is based on projects – it takes certain area of ground – it's difficult to build in avoided deforestation to that scheme because you have to look at the whole country. You cannot just look at one valley. But the avoided deforestation is different and has to be looked at the national level and therefore it's not suited for the clean development mechanism, but there could be similar mechanisms developed for avoided deforestation.*

**DW: If this initiative is successfully implemented, do we know to what extent it can actually reduce the build-up of carbon dioxide and to what extent it could actually slow down the rate of climate change?**

*HT: No, it's too early to answer that question. Basically what the climate Convention is doing now is looking at the technical aspects and we will actually start that work here in Bonn on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, but there is a lot of interest from the rainforest countries. They have taken the initiative, they have come to the climate Convention and said, "can you create possibilities for us to turn around this problem of losing the forests?"*

**DW: So, what are the next steps to get this going then? What needs to happen now?**

*HT: What needs to happen is we need to get a better understanding of what kind of system needs to be set up. How can the incentives for the local people, how can they be put in place? How can the national government structures be put in place? And how can one verify that the measures taken actually have the desired results? So there is some technical work, but this is a long-term issue. But the encouragement for us is the strong interest from governments to actually take action on conserving the forests and helping to protect the climate at the same time.*