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***Nature Communications* article shows 'true colours' of biochar advocates**
Groups condemn implied land-grab for biochar

- **Press Release by African Biodiversity Network, Amigransa Venezuela, Biofuelwatch, CESTA (Friends of the Earth El Salvador), COECOCEIBA Costa Rica, Econexus, ETC Group, FASE Brasil, Gaia Foundation, Global Forest Coalition, Global Justice Ecology Project, Latin American Network against Monoculture Tree Plantations (RECOMA), NOAH Food and Agriculture (FoE Denmark), Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales (OLCA) Chile, Otros Mundos Mexico, Rettet den Regenwald, Salva la Selva, Save America's Forests, Sobrevivencia (Friends of the Earth Paraguay) Timberwatch Coalition and World Rainforest Movement**

30th August 2010 – Twenty one groups today expressed their dismay at an article by leading biochar advocates, published by the science magazine *Nature,* which proposes that an area larger than the land mass of India could be turned into charcoal plantations in the name of climate change mitigation.[1] The paper's own figures contradict the authors' claims that biochar will not lead to large-scale land grabbing in the global South.

The article, posted online in the August 2010 edition of *Nature Communications*, claims that 12% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions could be avoided by producing vast quantities of charcoal and adding it to soils, a practice called "biochar". Although the authors claim that this could be done without the conversion of natural habitats and agricultural lands, the figures and forecasts used as a basis for their calculations tell a very different story, implying land-conversion on an unprecedented scale. The authors claim that there are nearly 200 million hectares of "abandoned cropland" that could be converted to crops and trees to produce biochar[2]. In addition, 170 million hectares of tropical grasslands could be turned into short-rotation tree plantations to produce both biochar and animal fodder.[3]

Co-authors Johannes Lehmann and Stephen Joseph are Chair and Vice-Chair of the International Biochar Initiative, which lobbies for carbon credits and subsidies for biochar.

The concept of "abandoned or marginal cropland" has been strongly criticized by social movements and civil society groups around the world because the term is being widely used to refer to land upon which millions of peasant farmers, indigenous peoples and pastoralists depend. Referring to community lands rich in biodiversity as "abandoned and marginal" and assuming those lands are "available" for conversion is already resulting in massive land grabs – especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Such lands in fact play an essential role in maintaining biodiversity and regulating the climate.[4]

The groups critical of the *Nature Communications* article are among more than 100 organisations worldwide who signed an international declaration last year urging caution about large-scale biochar deployment and opposing carbon credits for biochar.[5] Two UN reports and various scientists are amongst those who have warned against large-scale biochar deployment because it could lead to even more land being turned into monoculture plantations.[6]

Anne Maina from the African Biodiversity Network states: "Groups have been warning for years that the biochar techno-fix will mean land-grabbing on a vast scale. Time and time again, biochar advocates have misled the public with claims that we can produce vast amounts of charcoal from residues alone. Now they are showing their true colours: Large-scale biochar means large-scale land

grabs."

Raquel Nunez from the World Rainforest Movement adds: "Authors of the study couch their vast land-grabbing plans in terms like 'conservative', 'small scale' and 'sustainable' and try to hide those plans in obscure supplementary notes and tables. They call for 'sustainability standards' but there can be nothing sustainable about converting lands on which millions of people depend and which are also important for ecosystem integrity and biodiversity protection. This must be a wakeup call."

Wally Menne from Timberwatch, African Focal Point for the Global Forest Coalition, states: "The 'sustainability' myth used by individuals and institutions promoting large-scale biochar, is underpinned by the dubious notion of 'sustainable production guidelines'. This is based on tree plantation certification systems such as that of the FSC [Forest Stewardship Council], and it will not prevent harm to local communities and ecosystems."

Helena Paul from Econexus adds: "By using terms like 'agroforestry' or 'silvo-pastoral systems', the authors mask large plantation plans which in no way resemble the sustainable practices used by small farmers and pastoralists around the world."

For more information:

Teresa Anderson, the Gaia Foundation, teresa@gaianet.org +44 20 7428 0055
Anne Maina, African Biodiversity Network, anne@africanbiodiversity.org 254 67 20229/30; 254 67 22373
Helena Paul, EcoNexus, h.paul@econexus.info +44 207 431 4357
Diana Bronson, ETC Group, diana@etcgroup.org +1 514 629 9236 (cell) +1 514 273 6661 (office)

Notes:

[1] The article "Sustainable Biochar to Mitigate Global Climate Change" by Dominic Woolf et al was published in *Nature Communications* on 10th August 2010 and is publicly available at http://www.nature.com/ncomms/journal/v1/n5/full/ncomms1053.html . The land and biomass figures referred to can be found mainly in the Supplementary Notes: http://www.nature.com/ncomms/journal/v1/n5/full/ncomms1053.html#/supplementary-information .

[2] The "abandoned cropland" figure is 193 million hectares, derived from the only reference on which authors rely when calculating potential biomass from such lands: Biomass Energy: The Scale of the Potential Resources, Christopher Field et al, www.cas.muohio.edu/~stevenmh/Field%20et%20al%202008.pdf.

[3] This practice is referred to as 'silviculture' and would consist of dense short-rotation plantations of 'fodder trees', such as acacia, to produce both animal feed and wood for biochar. Fodder trees play an important role in many farming and pastoral communities, particularly in Africa. Those sustainable and traditional practices differ fundamentally from the dense plantings with short-rotation fellings envisioned in the biochar article. The latter are called 'fodder bank' and, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, they are not a traditional practice but one invented by the predecessor of the International Livestock Research Institute.

[4] Also see: "Biochar Land Grabbing: The Impacts on Africa", African Biodiversity Network, Gaia Foundation and Biofuelwatch, November 2009,

www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/docs/biochar_africa_briefing.pdf

[5] www.regenwald.org/international/englisch/news.php?id=1226

[6] The UN reports are “The Natural Fix? The role of ecosystems in climate mitigation", UNEP, June 2009 and the Report of the Second Ad-Hoc Technical Expert Group on Biodiversity and Climate Change, UNEP and Convention on Biological Diversity, 2009. See also “A Horizon Scan of Global Conservation Issues for 2010”, William Sutherland et al, 2010, www.cbd.int/doc/emerging-issues/2010-TREE-horizon-scan-conservation.pdf