



# DON'T COUNT YOUR TREES. FORESTS AREN'T THAT GREEN

*In the light of new research, our climate policy should be to focus on adaptation*

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CLIMATE change policy just got a whole lot harder. Once again, the culprit is the science.

New research suggests that forests are not the carbon sinks they were assumed to be.

Climate change policy-makers will have to return to the drawing board.

In late 2008, while he was a Smithsonian fellow, Griffith University associate professor Peter Pollard, a chemical engineer and water quality specialist, spent six months in one of the world's most isolated tropical jungles on Panama's Barro Colorado Island, and in the protected temperate boreal forests of Massachusetts.

In Panama, sitting atop a rudely constructed tower, he measured carbon dioxide and later, steering his tinnie alongside the giant ships that pass through the Panama Canal, he measured the rate at which freshwater microbes use dissolved oxygen to generate carbon dioxide. His task was to test whether rainforests really store greenhouse gases endlessly. The working assumption was that more carbon appears to enter forests than leaves the forests.

The assumption that unaccounted for carbon dioxide in tropical and temperate forests is held by trees was proved wrong. Pollard found that water-based microbes return carbon dioxide to the atmosphere in large amounts. The implications of this research

for climate change policy are huge. As Pollard states in his report to his sponsor, the Queensland government, "evidence is building to suggest that our forests do not store as much carbon as we thought. They may not be the climate change 'get out of jail free' card we all want."

Where does this research leave the federal government and the opposition on climate change policy?

The Coalition's direct-action policy commits it, among other things, to the planting of an additional 20 million trees by 2020 (former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke promised a billion in 1989) to re-establish urban forests and green corridors, presumably for the carbon-sink attributes as much as for any aesthetic purpose.

The federal government's emissions trading scheme relies on a large number of carbon emission permits being purchased from Third World nations to save rainforests.

If neither policy does the job it was meant to do, will the parties have to start again?

To the Greens this news will reinforce their view that carbon has to be stopped at the source, by closing coal-fired power stations.

To the climate sceptics this news will reinforce their view that the science is such a movable feast that it is best to wait and get some hard evidence of human-induced climate change before taking any action.

Third World countries with forests that see climate change as a way to freshen up the aid milch cow will be unhappy.

And what will the public think? The public will be looking for a way out of something that is far too complex and for which they know, especially following the fail-

ure of Copenhagen, political leaders have no answers. The political prize will be awarded to the party that relieves them of their dilemma — concern over climate change — even though there are no solutions to the apparent problem.

Climate change has now peaked as an issue; the politics are just too hard. There is no feasible policy option available that will lower Earth's temperature.

The real options are to prepare for adaptation, should it prove necessary, and invest in less carbon-emitting power sources, but not bring these online unless and until they are cheap. To bring these online now would create hardship, the worst outcome for adaptation.

Climate change will not be the vote-winner Labor had hoped for. It worked in 2007, when climate romance abounded and signing the Kyoto Protocol was free. That ruse cannot be repeated.

Now both parties have minimal targets, a 5 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide by 2020, using 2000 as a base.

With an increasing population and no replacement of any coal-fired power station slated, that is not going to happen. The public has to grow up really quickly on this one, but the major parties are reluctant to raise the white flag and admit there is no solution.

Intriguingly, the opposition has promised to establish forums to further debate climate change policy. This sounds like the path to reposition the electorate to the only game in town on climate change: adaptation and investment in energy technology research and development.

The further debate will have to

debunk the old adage that delaying change will be more costly.

This adage is just plain wrong. New technologies will not be adopted unless they are cheaper than current technologies. The reason why politicians subsidise the most expensive low carbon options, like wind turbines and solar panels, is that people mistake low carbon for low cost abatement.

Also, these boutique non-solutions are not a huge budget cost (just a considerable waste of money).

Sure, there is a risk to the environment in waiting for the technology to catch up, but that won't change the minds of several billion Chinese, Indians, Indonesians and South Americans.

These people are not in the same game as the West, they want to lift their standard of living, and they will not be assisting in carbon abatement.

If in future historians of public policy dig through the entrails of climate change they will find a fascinating combination of millenarianism, ego-driven scientists, business that preferred to use the environment as a sales device, a propensity by governments to allow NGOs to get too close to the policy process, a media that mistook stunts for debate, lying former politicians, and current politicians who wanted to ride the hero's wave, retiring before their purported policies bore no fruit.

There is good science and there is good economics, they each need time to guide the way. The job of the politician in this debate is to buy time.

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