

COMMENTARY

(Response to *Am. J. Bot.* 104: 650–653)

Inconvenient realities and the path toward science-based forest restoration policies: A reply to Veldman et al.¹

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Our essay in the *American Journal of Botany* (Chazdon and Laestadius, 2016) referred to the global map of opportunities for restoration of forests and landscapes as an important catalyst for a global restoration process. The areas indicated on this map as candidates for deeper examination at a national or subnational scale were selected among lands where tree cover has either been cleared or diminished. We recognize that many of these areas also contain native grassland and fully agree with Veldman et al. (2017) that native grasslands should not be converted to forests. We do not promote afforestation of grasslands in our essay, nor do the authors of the map (Laestadius et al., 2012, 2015).

We disagree with Veldman et al. (2017) that the global map poses a threat to native grasslands. The map is not a prescription for wall-to-wall reforestation but an indication of opportunities for Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR), which aims to improve ecological integrity and enhance human well-being in deforested and degraded landscapes, including active agricultural landscapes where native grasslands have previously been destroyed by agricultural land use (Chazdon and Laestadius, 2016). Moreover, as its creators have clearly stated: “The map shows the location of land with characteristics that indicate restoration opportunities, but it does not prescribe any particular type of restoration intervention. It is intended to inform the policy-making process at the global level and should be complemented by further investigation at regional and national scales, where more detailed information is needed and available” (Laestadius et al., 2012; p. 48). The global map and the interactive Atlas of Forest Restoration Opportunities are being

used as a catalyst for high-level restoration commitments (Bonn Challenge, 2017), not as a substitute for the more detailed and informed analysis at scales closer to the ground that will be undertaken during the implementation process.

Our essay reflects our own personal views and is not a product of the World Research Institute (WRI) or International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In our essay, we did not advocate particular restoration interventions for specific locations or site conditions. Rather, our essay addressed the need and the challenges in bringing together sectors with different roles and perspectives to support difficult and highly consequential decisions, including how and where to restore forest within landscapes. It is critical that scientific information from many fields of inquiry be available, communicated, and used in that process, including in determining areas that should not be targets for increasing tree cover. It is also critically important that this scientific information be delivered to the policy table in a way that engenders its uptake.

The comments of Veldman et al. (2017) provide a rich case in point. The repeated attacks on the approach of the WRI/IUCN/University of Maryland reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the realities of science-based policy making. As we emphasized in our essay, politicians and scientists use evidence and language differently, for valid professional reasons. Scientists can choose to remain within their domain and communicate only with other scientists who share their culture of using precise technical language and attention to details. But if scientists choose to move outside of this comfort zone and aim to communicate meaningfully with policy makers, accusatory statements and insistence on a rigid scientific point of view will not be fruitful. While we join with Veldman et al. (2017) in encouraging scientists and policy makers to acknowledge the unique and irreplaceable conservation value of tropical savannas, we maintain that the path toward a shared vision requires a spirit of engagement, practicality, and openness.

LITERATURE CITED

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