The Forest for the Trees? The Forest Stewardship Council at Fifteen, State/Corporate/Civil Society Balance in Emerging Global Environmental Governance Regimes

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The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a global timber and wood products labelling scheme, has been widely hailed a successful non-state, transnational environmental governance regime. This paper looks at some of the key achievements of the scheme, as well as some recent controversies regarding its effectiveness, developing in the process a critique of non-governmental market-based approaches to limiting environmentally destructive behaviour in the current global economic climate.

Founded in 1994, after decades of frustrated attempts to regulate the world tropical timber trade through international cooperation, the FSC is an institutionally innovative attempt to address a pressing global environmental problem – tropical (and temperate) deforestation through a non-governmental, market-based labelling scheme. Spearheaded by a some key international environmental NGOs (WWF-International, Greenpeace International, and the Rainforest Alliance, among others), in collaboration with a number of progressive companies from the international timber trade, the FSC is governed by a unique tri-partite Board of Directors and General Assembly, each of which is composed of three equally-weighted chambers, representing, 1) industry, 2) environmental concerns, and 3) “social” (i.e., labour and local community) groups. Certification of companies, on-going monitoring of forestry practices, and monitoring of the legitimate use of FSC labels by distributors and retailers, is assured through the participation of 1) professional non-profit “certifiers,” who award labels to producers, 2) independent “national initiatives” who monitor the use of labels by distributors and retailers, and 3) citizen watchdog groups who keep an eye on all of the above (see http://www.fsc.org/governance.html).

Although there are now over 100 million hectares of FSC certified forests in over 80 countries, world-wide, and the label is currently being carried by a growing number of retailers, and recognized by more customers in key markets (see http://www.fsc.org/facts-figures.html), global deforestation continues at alarming rates, and there is still little agreement about what constitutes “sustainable” forestry practice, especially in fragile tropical rainforests. Currently, key NGOs in the forest movement are divided about the effectiveness of this non-state approach to global deforestation. While some groups, like The Rainforest Alliance in New York, whose offshoot SmartWood is one of the major FSC certifying organizations, worldwide, are staunch supporters, other groups, such as the Rainforest Foundation-UK, Germany’s PRO-Regenwald, and the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) are growing more and more sceptical about the FSC’s capacity to monitor, much less enforce, more sustainable forestry practices. These more sceptical organizations have recently joined together to found “FSC-Watch” an independent NGO dedicated to monitoring various aspects of the FSC’s “false guarantees” and waning credibility (see http://www.fsc-watch.org/).

In this paper, we examine the various claims made by both supporters and detractors of the FSC process, and develop a more generalized critique of the limitations of non-state regulatory schemes like the FSC, which are essentially industry-funded, and rely upon citizens’ groups with limited resources to play the role of overseer/watchdog. The arguments we develop contribute to recent literature exploring the varying role of 1) states and international organizations, 2) self-regulating industry, and 3) NGOs and citizens’ groups, in emerging regimes of global environmental governance (see Brand et al., 2000; Park, et. al., 2008; Levy and Newell 2004;
