

# Earth Day Photo-Op 2022

Earth day was marked with a presidential executive order to **“Strengthen America’s Forests, Boost Wildfire Resilience, and Combat Global Deforestation”** may sound like a step in the right direction toward protecting forests and addressing climate change, but, a closer look at this *“historic and bold”* action plan reveals a doubled down commitment to business-as-usual programs and policies that exacerbate the climate crisis and its damaging effects on forests and communities; increase threats from wildfires, and open the door to new, extreme and unproven technologies to be unleashed on wild forests—all in the service of timber, oil and gas, mining, biotechnology and other industries.

**Carbon Offsets:** One of the major themes running through the EO is an emphasis on forests as carbon sinks that will offset carbon emissions. This model of forests as off-sets, however, has been widely debunked for enabling ongoing pollution. In this way, it simultaneously exacerbates climate injustice because this ongoing pollution largely occurs in low income communities, and threatens the very existence of forests by sidestepping the dire need to curb forest-killing emissions.

Part of the plan to use trees as carbon offsets also involves tree planting in our National Forests. The EO calls for the planting of “an estimated 1.2 billion trees [to] sequester 75 million metric tons of carbon.” Numerous studies have been published recently pointing out that planting trees can do more harm than good to the environment, and can even “backfire and reduce biodiversity with little impact on carbon emissions.” Planting non-native trees or trees in even age monocultures damages soils, displaces wildlife and can lead to depletion of water and the exacerbation of droughts. In this way, planting trees en masse in the drought-stricken western US, as is proposed, could worsen the drought situation and exacerbate the threat from wildfires.

**Reducing Wildfire Risk:** Biden’s EO cynically uses concern about wildfires impacting old growth forests as a pretext for advancing logging and forest destruction, calling for the additional logging and thinning of 50 million acres of National Forest and other lands at a cost of \$5 billion couched under the rhetoric of “reducing wildfire risk” through “hazardous fuels reduction,” though again studies are clear that increased logging leads to more, not less, wildfires.

US Agriculture Secretary Vilsack who oversees the US Forest Service and the management of National Forests commented,

“Old-growth forests represent some of the Crown Jewels of our national forest system, and provide important ecosystem services, including playing an essential role in storing carbon, supporting watershed function, and providing wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, climate-driven threats like drought and wildfire are destroying old-growth stands. I ... look forward to redoubling our efforts to conserve our national forests, making them more resilient to wildfire and climate change...”

In reality, the US Forest Service has, for decades, been the primary threat to old growth forests in the US. Heavily subsidized by US taxpayers, the Forest Service model has been to liquify National Forests below cost as a subsidy to the timber industry. Their success is evidenced by the tragic fact that the Continental US holds over 170 million acres of land in the National Forest system, of which more than 97% has been logged at least once.

**Nature Based Solutions:** Another repeated theme in the EO is “Nature Based Solutions.” Also called “Nature Based Disposessions,” this expanded offsets scheme, popularized at international fora such as UN Climate and Biodiversity Summits and the World Economic Forum, has been exposed by international human rights groups, Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations and forest protection advocates as a grotesque false solution. A statement denouncing Nature Based Solutions signed by 257 organizations and distributed at the 2021 UN Climate Summit in Glasgow explains:

*“Nature-based solutions’ ... are a scam. The purported solutions will result in ‘nature-based disposessions’ because they will enclose the remaining living spaces of Indigenous Peoples, peasants and other forest-dependent communities and reduce ‘nature’ to a service provider for offsetting corporations’ pollution to protect the profits of those corporations most responsible for climate chaos. Indigenous Peoples, peasants and other forest-dependent communities whose territories are being enclosed will face more violence, more restrictions on their use of their lands and more outside control over their territories.*

*“Such [NBS] schemes are not designed to address the climate crisis. Their primary function is to buy another decade or two of unrestrained corporate profiteering from fossil carbon extraction and industrial agriculture while increasing outside control over community territories.*

*“Nature-based solutions” are a repeat of the failed Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation [REDD] schemes that have done nothing to reduce*



*global greenhouse gas emissions or reign in the big food and agribusiness companies driving deforestation.”*

REDD schemes have resulted in forced displacements of the very communities that have kept forests intact. Their removal very often leaves these forests vulnerable to illegal logging, mining and ranching activities because the community is no longer there to protect it.

**Combating Global Deforestation and Enlisting Nature in the Fight Against Climate Change:** The plan to conserve 30% of the world’s land and oceans by 2030, which is echoed in Biden’s EO, has also been widely rejected by forest protection, human rights and Indigenous groups around the world. The plan relies on the established model of environmental conservation that advocates for “protected areas” devoid of humans. It promotes the racist idea that nature can only be saved if it is free of all human presence, which Survival International calls ‘fortress conservation’:

*“This racist approach considers the original inhabitants of the territory – Indigenous peoples and local communities – as pests who do not know how to manage their environment. They are evicted, and human rights violations such as torture, rape or murder abound if they attempt to return to their lands to eat, visit their sacred sites or collect medicinal plants.”*

Simon Counsell, Executive Director of Rainforest Foundation UK explained during the recent conference No biodiversity without human diversity that the plan to protect 30% of the Earth’s surface by 2030 in order to “offset” 30% of global climate emissions is “really just about money.” The purpose, he explained is to, “lessen pressure to reduce fossil fuel pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.” He further points out that it is based on a failed model. “While the land in protected areas has doubled [since 2010], biodiversity loss has continued to increase. This is because [putting land in protected areas] avoids the need to address the real underlying causes of biodiversity loss—overconsumption, mining, oil and gas, industrial agriculture and so on. Instead, we just create new protected areas which is much simpler than addressing these underlying causes.”

**Conclusion:** Without addressing the *drivers* of deforestation in the US and globally, there can be no successful effort to “safeguard mature and old growth forests” or “combat global deforestation.” Without this basic effort to deal with the causes of deforestation, the call to protect forests as a means to address climate change will ultimately lead to myriad false solutions that enable business as usual and exacerbate the forest health biodiversity and climate crises.

The Biden EO commitment to business as usual is confirmed in its call to “expand markets for innovative wood products and wood energy.” Simple logic dictates that one cannot simultaneously call for protecting forests alongside calls to expand markets for wood products including the use of trees to feed the massive demand for energy in the US. Such Orwellian doublespeak will, however, have dangerous effects like emboldening efforts to manufacture genetically engineered trees specially designed to feed these new markets. The release of human-designed GE trees into the environment would be a massive, irreversible experiment likely to have devastating and unpredictable impacts on wild forests and their biodiversity, not to mention the human communities nearby.

In sum, Biden’s Executive Order on forests is moving in exactly the wrong direction. Protecting forests demands a transformation of the systems that drive deforestation, not policies that will increase logging, create new markets for wood products, threaten forests with novel GE trees, or enable ongoing climate pollution.



[globaljusticeecology.org](http://globaljusticeecology.org)

## OPIOIDS GET A PASS

Several states, including Oklahoma, California and New York, have successfully sued Johnson and Johnson in the last couple of years to compensate for the expense and social costs incurred by the opioid epidemic. In November 2020, Oklahoma’s supreme court overturned its 2019 ruling that Johnson and Johnson was to pay \$465 million to the state. This overruling follows on the heels of a similar decision in California.

**Johnson and Johnson had originally been found to be a public nuisance**, aggressively marketing its opioid products and causing rampant addiction and overdoses. Several states have sued the manufacturers who profited mightily on the suffering of society. Over 400,000 deaths have been attributed to opioid addiction and overdose in the last 2 decades,

rivaling the number of people killed in traffic accidents. The opioid epidemic is estimated to have cost the public \$179 billion in 2018 alone (estimated costs calculated based upon mortality, healthcare, lost productivity, criminal justice and child and family assistance.)

Johnson and Johnson’s role in the epidemic is unique in that its operation starts in the poppy fields in Tasmania through the extraction, then sale of this product to companies like Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of **Oxycontin**. Johnson and Johnson conveniently also produces the active ingredient in **Naloxone**, the drug used to prevent death from opioid overdoses.

The case in Oklahoma was overturned on a technicality stating that the public nuisance statute was not intended for “large public health crises.” In the ruling, the judges determined that ‘product liability’ and the ‘nuisance laws’ are “two distinct causes of action, each with boundaries that are not intended to overlap.” Are you confused yet?

The language of the law is vague and the claim allows for broad interpretation essentially letting Johnson and Johnson profit off of the social devastation caused by its aggressive marketing.

The public nuisance statute was put in place to protect the public. It has been used to pay for the public costs incurred when a business causes damages like water or air pollution that results in health or property damage to the public. But conveniently, the judges declared the statute was meant only for localized damages. If this is the interpretation that stands, then all large corporations will no longer be held accountable for large scale damage because it isn’t ‘localized’.

**What a business opportunity! Damage large swaths of people, and it’s okay!**

**- Lisa Argento Martell**

