



Title: Strengthening Conservation in the Tropics: The Water Canon of Costa Rica

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Abstract: Problem statement: The tropics contain primary forests with a significant value for society, as they provide services such as carbon sequestration, soil conservation, bio-prospecting, water storage and others. Competing land uses have not favored conservation during the last several decades and therefore the need for an effective public policy instrument to curtail forest loss is evident. Approach: This article analyzed a policy intended to augment the funds for subsidizing forest conservation in Costa Rica through a tax on the consumption of potable water. This potable water canon was compared on the basis of legitimacy criteria to the alternative of imposing a tax on the exploitation of marginal lands. The analysis was based on comparing the perceptions different stakeholders have toward deforestation and its potential solutions, which result into different frames, or views regarding the problem. The perceptions were obtained from semi-structured interviews of individuals representing the central and local governments, national and local non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academia and political parties. Results: Overall, the water canon is a superior policy from the point of view of technical implementability and political feasibility. The regulation was expected to increase the forest cover in private hands in a more effective way than the tax on marginal lands, while keeping government expenditures to a minimum. The policy context is one of high expert and social trust and low government trust, requiring substantive stakeholder education and the creation of feedback mechanisms to increase acceptability during the implementation period. Conclusion: If approved by the Costa Rican Congress, the water canon will become an innovative conservation policy from which other developing countries will be able to obtain valuable lessons.