

Perspective

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American rupture

Gavin Esler interviews Sarah Churchwell

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Wade Graham's Walden

The tree thieves



Giant redwood trees in Sequoia National Park, California

I recently spent an afternoon walking in one of the planet's oldest forests, a grove of redwoods on the far northern coast of California.

Largely unchanged since the Cretaceous period 100 million years ago, the massive trees – some nearly twenty feet in diameter, more than 350 feet tall (coast redwoods are the world's tallest living things), and more than 1,000 years old – formed the columns of a soaring green cathedral. The vast trees were lit by a suffusing chlorophyll glow, its ferny floor dazzled by the few sun-flecks that threaded through the dense canopy high above. Near-complete silence reigned. I felt I was in the presence of a kind of primeval, oxygenated, sublime balance – one that exists at a scale of size and

time so much greater than our own that the thought of human insignificance comes naturally. I didn't require any New Age theories of "forest bathing", the esoteric Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, to feel its extraordinary power.

However, my bliss, and my comfort in humanity's smallness, was punctured by the knowledge that this grove is among just five per cent of the original old-growth redwoods left in existence. This paltry, surviving twentieth had only been saved, even as the saws moved in, by determined preservers who managed to cajole wealthy donors to chip in and buy them for posterity. Another nearby grove, containing the largest concentration on Earth of trees exceeding 350 feet, is named after its philanthropist saviour,

John D Rockefeller, of Standard Oil. It is a painful irony, considering he did as much as anyone to set the world on the path of fossil-fuelled destruction.

The other 95 per cent of the planet's ancient redwoods was liquidated in a 100-year paroxysm of clear-cutting by corporate timber monopolists, akin to Rockefeller. These men got away with it only through the connivance of governments stained in bad faith. Having undertaken to divide the great public forests among small, egalitarian communities of yeoman woodsmen supporting their families, the US government instead stood aside, feigning blindness, as investment syndicates and lumber barons moved in. The openly paid vagrants and sailors on shore leave ►

to file individual claims for the legal allocation of 160 acres, valued at \$2.50 per acre, which, once secured, were then handed over to the monopolists. This allowed them to fraudulently amass millions of acres, with a market value of at least \$1,200 per acre.

Money for nothing, and the trees for free.

A similar theft is occurring now, but on a planetary scale – and the UK is among the top thieves. The scam involves turning forests into smoke, rather than planks, and the multibillion-pound profits are fed by taxpayer funds. Enabling bureaucrats and industry defenders claim to be reducing carbon emissions, but they are actually increasing them, while clearcutting hundreds of thousands of acres of forests.

The practice started in 2009, when the European Union categorised burning biomass – otherwise known as wood – to generate electricity and heat as “renewable” and therefore producing zero accountable carbon emissions. The key word is “accountable”, since burning wood obviously does produce carbon emissions (otherwise known as smoke). But that sly accounting trick ignited a forest fire: European biomass generation went from near zero in 2009 to account for 60 per cent of all EU “renewable” energy today – creating a business worth \$10bn (£8.2bn) and counting.

The UK, which presents itself as a global climate leader, has aggressively adopted wood burning for power, subsidising the conversion of coal power plants to burn wood pellets – which are imported by the millions of tons from countries with extensive private (ie mostly unregulated) forests such as the US and Canada. One power station alone, the Drax plant in North Yorkshire, has converted four of its six coal furnaces since 2010 to burn wood. The plant now produces enough electricity for Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool combined. This consumes more than 18m tons of wooden pellets a year, or about 175,000 hectares of forest land.

Our government may crow that

biomass is helping the UK meet its climate targets, but its accounting is based not just on a loophole, but on a nested set of lies.

The first lie is that the industry only uses trimmings from logging and milling that would otherwise be unused, thus making it “sustainable”. But plentiful evidence shows clear-cut forests and stacked logs in the places that supply Drax and other UK and EU power operations. These include not just North America, but EU members Finland, Sweden, Lithuania and Latvia. Environmental groups estimate conservatively that half of imported biomass comes from natural forests – in flagrant violation of the EU’s Biodiversity Strategy, which calls for “strict protection of all primary and old-growth forests in the EU”.

The second lie is that burning wood is carbon neutral. Partly, the assumption rests on the forced maths that trees grow back, eventually re-sequestering the carbon that is burned, therefore justifying cutting and burning them now. But forests take a minimum of decades to regrow. Using such deceptive discounting is a smokescreen for what the science clearly shows: that biomass generation in its full cycle produces two to three times as much carbon pollution as fossil fuels. To label it renewable and zero-carbon is beyond dissonance and hypocrisy – it is nothing short of lies and theft from the public purse, from the planet, and from our children’s future. And yet, as with the redwood-liquidators of the 19th and 20th centuries, holding today’s cabal of bought politicians and resource monopolists to account is a thin hope. One that quickly goes up in smoke in the political realities of our unbalanced culture.

Wade Graham is the author of “American Eden, a cultural history of gardens in America”, “Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shape the World” and “Braided Waters: Environment and Society in Molokai, Hawaii”. He is a trustee of Glen Canyon Institute in Salt Lake City and lives in Los Angeles. wadegraham.com



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