

Columbus Dispatch (Ohio)

May 28, 2000, Sunday

FOREST PROJECT HELPING AEP OFFSET TOXINS

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SECTION: NEWS, Pg. 1C

LENGTH: 1016 words

In the global war against pollution, can American Electric Power of Columbus be a black hat in the Adirondacks and a white hat in the Amazon?

AEP's 16 power plants released 56,500 tons of toxic pollutants during 1998, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's latest toxic-inventory report. And this doesn't include major air contaminants such as carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide or nitrogen oxide.

As the major Midwest coal burner, the company has been blamed for much of the acid rain and smog across the northeastern United States and Canada -- including pollutants that damage forests and lakes in the Adirondacks.

At the same time, however, AEP is the lead partner in a \$ 9.5 million project to save 2 million acres of Amazonian rain forest in Bolivia, teaming with the Nature Conservatory and Bolivia's Friends of Nature Foundation.

Dale Heydlauff, AEP vice president for environmental affairs, sees no contradiction.

The Bolivian project, he explains, not only benefits the environment and provides a teaching tool, but it could save AEP billions of dollars in pollution controls if international agreement is reached on a treaty to prevent global warming.

Trees and other plants absorb carbon dioxide, release oxygen and store the carbon in their plant tissues. Fossil fuels, including coal, were once plants and so release carbon when they are burned. Scientists blame industrial fossil fuel use for an increase in global temperature and associated [climate](#) changes.

In negotiating an international agreement to curb global warming, countries have discussed allowing companies to preserve or create forests as a way to offset carbon they pump into the atmosphere.

"It's very significant and it's very inexpensive, in comparison to other alternatives for reducing carbon dioxide emissions within our own system," Heydlauff said.

Heydlauff said AEP plants emit about 120 million tons of carbon dioxide each year. The goal of the Bolivian park project is to recapture 25 million to 36 million tons of carbon dioxide in 30 years, according to the project Web site.

Although no system of offset credits has yet been approved for tree-planting or forest preservation, Heydlauff estimates the Amazon project could reduce AEP's required carbon dioxide cuts under the Kyoto treaty by as much as half.

Heydlauff said AEP was enlisted by the Nature Conservatory, based in Virginia, to double the size of Bolivia's [Noel Kempff Mercado](#) National Park, which was under threat from loggers and farmers. The \$ 9.5 million -- including \$ 5.5 million from AEP -- is being used in part to buy back timber concessions from lumber companies, protecting the park from commercial exploitation for at least 30 years.

"The primary purpose of the project is to sequester (capture) carbon dioxide and store carbon that would have been released as a result of logging activities in the area," the project Web site (www.noelkempff.com) notes.

"It is the largest project of its kind in the world and serves as a showcase for an innovative and cost-effective approach to abating greenhouse gas emissions."

The park, which is being expanded to 4 million acres from 2 million, is described as a unique biological reserve, home to at least a thousand species of animals, birds and flora. Project funds also will be used for park protection and regional economic development.

Despite its resistance to many of the pollution-control plans recommended by the EPA, AEP historically has promoted conservation activities, Heydlauff said.

"Yes, we burn a lot of coal and produce lots of emissions but for 50 years we've also been planting trees and doing reclamation across southeast Ohio, not because it was required (after 1972) but because we thought it was the right thing to do."

As part of its commitment, AEP next year will begin sending five teachers and five students from its service area each year to Bolivia on 10-day study tours. Participants are expected to bring back insights on **climate** change and preserving endangered environments.

Students need more information on the choices and trade-offs involved in the 1997 Kyoto **climate** treaty, said Bexley High School teacher Craig Kramer, who will help initiate the "E-Lab" program next month in Bolivia. Kramer, who has taken students to Ohio power plants and coal mines, said students need to know the debate is about more than just pollution controls.

Also traveling to the park this summer under AEP sponsorship are Becky Grimm, a science teacher at Hastings Middle School in Upper Arlington; Christy Howell, a student at Columbus' Eastmoor Academy; and Sarah Wehmer, a student at West Jefferson High School.

"It's hypocritical for us to blame these corporations for the energy problem when we all use gobs of electricity," Grimm said. "There can't be sides in terms of the environment. We all have to take care of it."

Still, Kert Davies, science policy director for Ozone Action, an environmental group based in Washington, said such forest conversation programs by major energy corporations need to be kept in perspective.

"AEP is a very big part of the problem globally," he said. "It's among the largest carbon dioxide emitters in the world."

"What we fear is this becomes an easy out for corporations such as AEP, allowing them not to clean up the air in Ohio and instead go plant a forest in Bolivia. Our position is the first priority should be to clean up at home. "

Forests, however vast, can't absorb all the carbon being pumped into the atmosphere, he said. "There's no way to plant enough forests on the planet to soak up the carbon we're adding."

AEP went to Bolivia because it would be seven times more expensive to get the same pollution-offset credits through tree planting in the United States, Heydlauff said. The company hopes to increase its jungle conservation programs in the future, he said.

Heydlauff agrees trees can't do it all.

"We don't expect we'll be able to rely exclusively on projects like this to meet our (pollution control) commitments," he said.

LOAD-DATE: May 28, 2000

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Map, Phot, (1) Map (2) Eric Albrecht / Dispatch Headed to Bolivia's [Noel Kempff Mercado](#) National Park as part of a study program are, from left, Bexley High teacher Craig Kramer, Hastings Middle School teacher Becky Grimm and Eastmoor Academy student Christy Howell

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