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Biofuels are any kind of fuel derived from living things. In principle, they are a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional fossil fuels like oil and coal. It is also estimated that emissions from burning biofuels are broadly comparable to the amount of the gas absorbed from the atmosphere when the biofuel plants are grown. Sounds great. Right? Sadly not. This simple story misses two important points which place natural ecosystems and poor communities around the world in great danger. The first point is that a considerable amount of energy – and therefore harmful emissions – is needed to grow, process and transport biofuels, and many current biofuels provide minimal carbon savings; some may even result in higher emissions than the fossil fuel they substitute. This was underlined last month by the results of a BirdLife-supported study which concluded that when these ‘indirect land uses’ are taken into account, biofuels will emit an extra 27 to 56 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions per year – the equivalent to an extra 12 to 26 million cars on Europe’s roads by 2020 ([Europe’s biofuels plans driving social and environmental destruction](#)). The second key point is that the demand for land upon which to grow biofuels will lead to the destruction of natural habitats on a potentially catastrophic scale. This conversion of land will also cause the displacement of local people. This demand is being driven by renewable energy targets like the European Renewable Energy Directive that requires member states to meet 10% of transport fuel from renewable sources by 2020. We reported last month how such targets are central to the threats faced by African Important Bird Areas like the Dakatcha Woodlands and the Tana River Delta ([Out of Africa – a round up of stories](#)). ‘We are seeing the impact of European renewable fuel targets first hand with our work in Kenya’, said Dr Tim Stowe – the RSPB’s (BirdLife Partner in the UK) director of international operations. ‘The Tana River Delta and the Dakatcha Woodlands are both hugely important areas for wildlife and they are currently at risk from irresponsible and unsustainable biofuel plantations’. Speaking from Kenya, Paul Matiku – Executive Director of Nature Kenya (BirdLife Partner) – added: ‘our biofuel message needs to resonate among the decision makers in Europe. It is critical to ensure no net loss of biodiversity globally as a result of these biofuel targets’. ([Biofuels policy threatens wildlife habitats](#)). Similar threats are also being faced by Mabira Forest Reserve in Uganda and Mamuta-Mayoso Wildlife Sanctuary in Sierra Leone ([Large-scale biofuels production threatens biodiversity and food security](#)). Threats such as biofuels clearly shows the international nature of policy responses to ensure biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. A decision in one place can have huge and damaging impacts for another. This is why BirdLife is such an effective and important network. By working together as a global Partnership we can act in many places – from local to global – to maximise our impact, and share our resources. Biofuels and biodiversity was a hot issue debated at the recent biodiversity convention meeting in Nagoya (Japan) where BirdLife worked hard to try to ensure that biofuel production does not harm biodiversity or people’s livelihoods ([Biofuels and biodiversity – Policy Briefing](#)). As I write staff from BirdLife and the wider Partnership are at further international negotiations in Cancún (Mexico) to fight for a fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement on climate change from the world’s governments. Here we are pushing for solutions to mitigate and adapt to climate change which are environmentally and socially sound ([The seven hot issues for the Cancún climate talks](#)). With a window between now and 2015 in which it may be possible to slow down or lower the expected increases in global temperatures, let’s hope the talks come to much more than just hot air?