
Ecuador: Endesa-Botrosa's certified plantation in Rio Pitzara (*)

In April 2006, the German certifying firm GFA Consulting Group granted the FSC seal to Endesa-Botrosa's timber operations and to its tree plantations located in the Rio Pitzara plot covering 8,380 hectares on the Ecuadorian coast (GFA-FM/COC-1267). FSC certification of Endesa Botrosa, belonging to the Durini Timber Group, represents a severe setback to the hundreds of local peasant, indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities whose forests and livelihoods have been devastated for decades by this company.

From the start, the certifier GFA's evaluation process of Endesa-Botrosa has been superficial and GFA has systematically ignored Endesa-Botrosa's lack of compliance with FSC Principles and Criteria. The evaluation was based on the qualification of a questionnaire that GFA sent at the beginning of 2005 by e-mail to a group of 39 people from NGOs, institutions and companies in Quito. In this way, GFA did not receive any important criticism of the timber company. It should be pointed out that not all the people on the list supplied by GFA received the questionnaire and that others did not reply.

But what is even more serious is that GFA did not consult a single representative of the owners of the natural forests where Endesa-Botrosa obtains its supply of 73% of the timber used. Most of the natural forests exploited by SETRAFOR, the Durini Group's harvesting company that supplies Endesa-Botrosa, have been irreparably degraded or totally destroyed by the logging company, with serious negative impacts on the local population. Furthermore, in June 2005, the Ecuadorian organization Acción Ecológica sent a detailed and formal complaint to the certifier (available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/>). During the weeks that followed, meetings were held with GFA, both in Ecuador and in Germany, at which the complaints against Endesa-Botrosa were presented.

According to the report by the GFA certifier, the Endesa-Botrosa Rio Pitzara property is located between the provinces of Esmeraldas and Pichincha. Its natural vegetation is Tropical Humid Forest and Premontane Humid Forest. The plantation covers 5,406 hectares and some 1,800 hectares are to be added over the coming years.

The report does not contain concrete and detailed data on when and under what circumstances the land was acquired and allocated to Endesa Botrosa, nor about the previous owners nor on its original use and vegetation. However, precisely in this area, land allocation to Endesa-Botrosa has led to severe and unresolved conflicts, complaints by local peasants and by the NGO Accion Ecologica, in addition to research and verdicts against the company by public institutions.

A well documented case is that of a property covering 3,123 hectares known as El Pambilar, allocated to Botrosa in 1998 by the National Agrarian Development Institute (INDA). After over two years of violent confrontations between peasants and company staff, complaints and official investigations, in 2000 the Ministry of the Environment confirmed that 90% of the land (2,830 has) was located within the State Forestry Heritage (PFE) and had been illegally allocated. The Ministry decided that Endesa-Botrosa must return the land to the State and the Constitutional Tribunal resolved that the peasants should be compensated by the company for the prejudice caused to them.

Furthermore, the management of tree plantations by Endesa Botrosa is poor. In 1997, a GTZ study of the Pachaco species (*Schizolobium parahyba*) plantations described that “it was only possible to determine limited sustainability of timber production” and that “fundamental elements are missing for a sustainable concept of forest management.” In particular, shortfalls were detected in the surveys of the forestry site, the soil and in the nutrient analysis as well as in adaptation of the machinery to the small dimensions of the timber and in operator training.” Additionally it was observed that many trees became sick when reaching the age of seven, finally dying off and that “an increasing number of trees in the older surfaces of the plantation are in very poor condition.” As a result, the company lost some 2,500 hectares of plantations with the Pachaco species.

Another study points out that the African species *Terminalia superba* in Río Pitzara was planted in secondary forests and that the natural vegetation was cleared to establish the plantation. Even worse, according to the IUCN Red List, the area of Río Pitzara is the only habitat of a very rare endangered species of frog: the Río Pitzara Robber Frog (*Eleutherodactylus helonotus*). This frog is only found in two places close to the Río Pitzara, in a total area of less than 10 square kilometres. The conversion of its natural habitat into industrial tree plantations may mean the extinction of the species.

Outside its plantation there is another very important FSC requirement that Endesa-Botrosa is not complying with. All non-certified timber processed by the company must be “controlled timber,” which means that it is timber used legally.

In short, the unlawful actions involving Endesa-Botrosa such as the unlawful allocation of land belonging to the State Forestry Heritage to the company, the violent conflict over lands with the local peasants and the crimes committed against them, the felling of forest remnants and the fact that the forest zone where the Río Pitzara plantation has been established is possibly the only habitat of an endangered species of fauna should be a deterrent to FSC certifying the plantation. However, today it bears the FSC seal.

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(*) Endesa-Botrosa is well-known for the massive destruction caused by its activities in Ecuadorian forests. However, in this article we want to point out the connotations regarding certification of its plantations, as this is the focus of this bulletin.