
Ecuador: Heart of palm cultivation results in deforestation

The commercial cultivation of "palmito" palms (from which heart of palm is extracted) began in Ecuador in 1987 and since then its expansion has been constant, having become a new export crop. The heart of palm is obtained from the interior of the trunk of several species of palm trees. The "chontaduro" (*Bactris gasipaes*), a palm native to Ecuador, is the most cultivated in the country to this aim.

Palmito cultivation is generating deforestation in extensive areas of tropical forest in several Amazonian provinces (Napo, Sucumbíos, Morona Santiago, Pastaza), as well as resulting in the disappearance of a number of forest remnants of the country's Western region. This crop has found in Ecuador's tropical and sub-tropical regions the perfect agro-environmental conditions for its development: stable light, humidity and temperature, regular rainfall throughout the year and excellent irrigation and soil conditions.

However, the impacts of palmito production increase as the area under cultivation is expanded. Among such impacts, the more important are the substitution of the original vegetation (particularly primary and secondary forests), loss of biodiversity and soil erosion. Many palmito growers have not even respected the vegetation protecting the water courses and have extended their plantations to the river borders, resulting in the falling of solid materials to the water and thus causing problems to downstream water users. They have not even thought about the need to conserve vegetation corridors to allow a minimum passage for local biodiversity.

Even though palmito plantations have not yet reached the dimensions of oil palm monocultures in the country, it is already possible to perceive changes in the landscape and the disappearance of a large part of the forest remnants, particularly in the western foothills of the Andes. Cultivation of this palm is in constant expansion due to the increase in the global demand for Ecuadorian heart of palm and it is thus very possible that they might expand further, resulting in the disappearance of the last remnants of biodiversity in Ecuador's Western region.

In many spheres, the myth that monocultures of native species are "not as bad" as plantations of exotics such as oil palm, pine or eucalyptus still prevails. However, it is time to recognize that the prevailing production models -particularly large scale export-oriented monocultures- are environmentally unsustainable and that they don't aim at providing for basic human needs, such as food security. On the contrary, this model is generating impacts such as the loss of genetic biodiversity and thus reducing the future possibilities of survival of humanity. It is time to demand governments to take on their responsibilities regarding the local and global environment. It is time to understand that diversity has more advantages and value than large scale monocultures -be them of native or exotic species- which are and will always be socially and environmentally unsustainable.

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