
Brazil: The definition of forest – another front for resistance and reconquest

The year 2011 was declared the International Year of Forests by the United Nations. Major international events such as the climate conference in South Africa and the upcoming Rio+20 summit in Brazil and biodiversity conference in India have also contributed to making forests a key issue on the global agenda, as well as the subject of high-profile public relations campaigns.

Given the obvious importance of forests for life on the planet, numerous statements and declarations have aimed at raising international public awareness of the urgent need to protect forests. The provision of water, food, wood, medicines, etc.; the regulation of the water and climate cycles; the decomposition and reproduction of life – the defence of forests, as a campaign slogan, has universal appeal. Who could be against the defence of forests? These are a type of discursive campaign that seeks to construct a “we” that simultaneously encompasses the source and target of the campaign's message.

The FAO and UN campaign to defend forests has been joined by, among numerous others, the World Bank's Forest Protection Programme, British Petroleum's New Forests in Brazil and Scotland, and other initiatives sponsored by Petrobras, Fibria, Veracel, Suzano, Vale do Rio Doce, Plantar, and so on. In addition to the “sustainable forest management” initiatives of pulp and paper and green steel industries, and the WWF's New Generations Plantations Project, an international alliance called the Diálogo Florestal (Forest Dialogue) (1) has been created in Brazil, bringing together private companies, scientific institutions and certification bodies, as well as environmental organizations.

Any internet search turns up a huge number of links on the protection and promotion of forests. What is not made clear, in initial searches and in the titles of the linked web pages, is what is understood, and what is meant to be understood, by the word “forest”. Because this is supposedly such an obvious concept, the question is rarely posed: What exactly is a forest, anyway?

According to FAO, whose definition of forests is used as the guideline for international climate and biodiversity conferences, a forest is “land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 meters and a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ.” (2)

The Kyoto Protocol and other international climate-related documents use the FAO definition to define the “forests” that should be defended and promoted, for example, through the flexibility mechanisms established for the countries of the North to fulfil their emissions reduction commitments, such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). In these contexts:

“Forest” is a minimum area of land of 0.05-1.0 hectares with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10-30 percent with trees with the potential to reach a minimum height of 2-5 metres at maturity in situ. A forest may consist either of closed forest formations where trees of various storeys and undergrowth cover a high proportion of the ground or open forest. Young natural stands and all plantations which have yet to reach a crown density of 10-30 percent or tree height of

2-5 meters are included under forest, as are areas normally forming part of the forest area which are temporarily unstocked as a result of human intervention such as harvesting or natural causes but which are expected to revert to forest. (3)

For Claudentina, a quilombola woman (descendant of escaped African slaves) in her 60s from the community of Angelim in Sapê do Norte, in the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo, the forest is “a place where people used to go to find fruits and seeds, vines, wood, plants, roots; to hunt and fish. It was also a place to practice our faith.” Claudentina's definition of forest is based on her experience with the Atlantic Forest or Mata Atlântica in the region where she lives. It is also based on her memories of the past, because, since the age of 20, she has witnessed the clearing of her forest and its replacement with the tree plantations established by companies like Aracruz-Fibria and Bahia-Sul Suzano.

When compared to Claudentina's description, the official definitions of “forest” are clearly insufficient and formal, since they frame the term as an “area of land” of a certain size, with certain characteristics, also quantitative, in terms of trees at different stages of growth. What species of trees are these? What are their uses? Who does this area belong to? Are there conflicts or threats? The official definitions also fail to make any reference to other forms of life that inhabit the forests: mushrooms, plants other than trees, animals, people, and also the rich immaterial universe of Claudentina's faith.

An important key for the interpretation of hegemonic semantics: the FAO definition that is the basis for forest-related international dialogue implicitly establishes that “forest” can also (or mainly) be interpreted and co-defined as a large-scale plantation of a single, fast-growing tree species. This underlying meaning in the official definition makes it possible to channel large shares of financial investment, public and private policies and scientific research towards industrial plantations.

In Brazil, while the powerful agribusiness lobby is tearing apart the Forest Code (see box) in Congress, the key objective of government policies is the expansion of the “forest stock” of eucalyptus and pine from the current 6.5 million hectares to 12 million hectares, primarily to supply the pulp and steel mills already installed in Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Bahia and planned for Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Maranhão, Rio de Janeiro and Pará. The pretexts are numerous: to “recover degraded areas” in Bahia, “neutralize the carbon footprint of ‘mega-events’” in Rio de Janeiro, “prevent a forestry blackout” in São Paulo, “create a forestry centre” in Maranhão and Pará, promote the “clean development mechanism” in Minas Gerais and foster a “forestry economy” in Rio Grande do Sul. The underlying reason is much more straightforward: to create the symbolic and social, financial, environmental and legal conditions for the promotion of plantations of fast-growing eucalyptus trees.

Claudentina's testimony demonstrates that the Forest Code is more than just another piece of legislation. It evokes for younger, “post-eucalyptus” generations the meaning of the gallery forests that once grew along the banks of rivers and streams that no longer exist – forests that the Forest Code is meant to protect. It evokes the memory of the Murici lagoon where people used to fish in Angelim, which is now completely dried up and covered over after 40 years of eucalyptus planting by Aracruz-Fibria.

Claudentina's memories are not merely a recollection of the past. Rather, they serve as a key element in a discourse of resistance aimed at the future reconquest and reconversion of her people's territory.

This is a summary of the report “Que é isto – uma floresta? Marketing verde e o código de Claudentina como resistência discursiva” (What is a Forest? Green marketing and Claudentina's code as discursive resistance) by Marcelo Calazans, FASE-ES/Rede Deserto Verde. The full text in Portuguese is available at: http://wrm.org.uy/paises/Brasil/Marketing_verde_e_o_codigo_de_Claudentina.pdf

(1) www.dialogoflorestal.org.br.

(2) FAO. Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010, Annex 2. Terms and definitions used in FRA 2010.

(3) Decision 11/CP-7. Annex 1 (a) adopted in Marrakech.

What is the Forest Code?

The current Forest Code is a 1965 law which establishes, among other requirements, that landowners in Brazil must preserve a certain percentage of native forest on their properties as so-called Legal Reserves. The percentage ranges from 20% in the Mata Atlântica region to 80% in most of the Amazon region. In addition, the code establishes the category of Permanent Preservation Areas where forests must remain intact along the banks of rivers and on the sides and tops of hills and mountains. With regard to rivers, while the requirement varies in accordance with the width of the river, a minimum 30-metre strip of forest must be maintained on both sides. (For more information see WRM Bulletin 166.)

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