
Brazil: Sustainable on paper - the eucalyptus plantations of Bahia

Endless rows of tree trunks pass before our eyes behind the car window. In the utmost south of the Brazilian state Bahia, eucalyptus plantations are a common sight. Sometimes we can see the remains of the Mata Atlântica, the majestic Atlantic Rainforest that used to cover the region. Now there is only four percent left. Logging companies and sawmills have made huge profits here.

After the deforestation, something new was introduced to the region: eucalyptus, the new green gold. The plantations we pass are all owned by Veracel.

David Fernandes, Veracel's forestry official, guides us over sand roads through a giant maze of eucalyptus plantations. The car halts at a slope with a view on the company's pride: the mosaic landscape. Fernandes elaborates enthusiastically on the harmony between the eucalyptus on the higher plateaus and the rainforest on the steep slopes and alongside the rivers.

Further down the road the greenery makes room for an arid plain, where everything has been cut down. But next to the dry land, young eucalyptus is already growing for a future production cycle. We drive between two huge walls of stacked tree trunks. Big machines, resembling mechanised prehistoric predators, are cutting down the mature eucalyptus trees at incredible speed. It takes a mere 25 seconds to cut down, debark, saw and stack a tree. Fernandes: 'For each hectare we plant 833 trees. After seven years the trees are thirty meters high and ready to be harvested.'

Bahia's climate allows a higher productivity than elsewhere in the world. 'It's only during the first year that we spray nine litres of glyphosate per hectare. It's a Monsanto weed killer, more commonly known as Round Up. It's a perfectly safe product, there's nothing wrong with it.' The FSC agrees, according to them the use of the weed killer does not endanger sustainability. But what Fernandes lacks to mention, is that Veracel uses 'large amounts of a chemical product blacklisted by the FSC', as stated in an ASI [a company inspecting for FSC certifiers] report concerning Veracel's certification. Plantations infested by ants are sprayed with Sulfluramide. The company asked and received an exceptional permission from the FSC in 2008.

IBAMA, the federal environmental agency, had to impose some restraints on Veracel's use of chemical herbicides as well. The company used weed killers on land intended for the regeneration of rainforest, resulting in the destruction of a large amount of indigenous trees. Veracel was fined 400.000 real (€160.000).

Illegal paper

In 2008 Veracel was convicted by the federal court for deforestation of the Atlantic Rainforest, and was fined twenty million real (eight million euros). During the trial it was revealed that Veracel did not have a valid environmental impact assessment for its eucalyptus plantations. The judge ruled the licenses for the 96.000 hectares of plantations to be illegal.

'The consumer buying cellulose from Veracel has to realize that he is buying an illegal product and that the sustainability label doesn't reflect reality', warns João Alves da Silva, public prosecutor in Eunápolis.

Indigenous protest

Respect for the rights of indigenous people is the third principle that companies have to obey to obtain the FSC label. Eliane Anjos, sustainability officer at Veracel, assures us that Veracel maintains an excellent relationship with all Indian communities in the region. Biribiri, a leader of the Pataxó Indian Community Coroa Vermelha, gladly confirms.

However, Coroa Vermelha is the exception that proves the rule. In the region of Veracel's eucalyptus plantations, only four of the nineteen Pataxó and Tupinambá communities have their own territory. The inhabitants of Guaxuma, an Indian village alongside the BR IOI road, have been waiting on the recognition of their territory for more than ten years. The territory they claim reaches far beyond the plantations that come closer every second.

Since a couple of years they are completely surrounded by eucalyptus. Kuhupyxa – we can call him Antonio – tells us that ten years ago, his community was hunting in rainforest that has now turned into eucalyptus. He takes us to the fence next to his house. 'Veracel wanted to plant eucalyptus up to here. Ten meters from my house. They sprayed everything with poison while the kids were playing outside. We chased them away with bow and arrow. They don't have the least bit of respect for us.'

Led up the plantation path

An elementary condition to be recognized as a sustainable plantation, is that the plantation cannot be situated in places which recently housed natural forests or rainforests.

Still we can read in the audit reports of SGS Qualifor that Veracel did deforest rainforest after 1994, in order to plant eucalyptus.

The research centre CEPEDDES in Eunápolis has video images of Veracel, at that time operating under the name Veracruz, destroying the rainforest with tractors and chains in the nineties. For them it is crystal clear that the company does not deserve a sustainability label.

In a devastating report, the ASI inspection team crushes the work of SGS Qualifor. SGS Qualifor did not allot enough time for a thorough audit, and was pleased with figures and studies provided by Veracel without checking or verifying anything. The report reveals that ASI would not have granted the label. But the power of ASI is limited to inspecting certifiers. Only SGS Qualifor can retract the label.

Nobody eats eucalyptus

On a rainy day we meet a group of men and women assailing young eucalyptus trees with machetes. They are members of MLT, a small organisation for landless farmers. Rose Lemos explains: 'This land is terra devoluta, it is property of the state and is intended for land reform. Veracel doesn't have the right to plant here', she says. Social organisations assert that Veracel has planted eucalyptus like this on roughly 30.000 hectares of government property. MLT is still waiting on the judge's verdict about this particular piece of devoluta: 'We want to grow food crops again, because people don't eat eucalyptus. This region has the capability to export food instead of importing it, which it does now.'

Further down, MLT has already planted cassava, beans, corn, pumpkins and other crops. The 65 families living under plastic sheets dream of the day they can supply the city, because now all the food comes from other states.

In the eyes of Veracel, the actions of the landless farmer organisations are nothing more than vandalism, costing the company already five million real (two million euros) since 2009.

The city of Eunápolis now has 85.000 inhabitants. There are a lot of new, flourishing businesses owing their success to the presence of Veracel. But the drug trade has increased as well. Here, armed young boys barely twelve years old ride their bicycles through town hunting for cellphones and other valuable collaterals. On the outskirts of a favela, Roberto Joaquina dos Santos, living in the gut of the city, tells us how everything has changed: 'The people who moved here only knew sowing and harvesting. They weren't prepared for a life in the city. The slums grew and brought violence and drugs with them.'

Sustainability without borders?

If the stakeholders give the green light, Veracel will increase the production of its pulp factory from 1 million tons to 2,7 million tons. In order to do that, Veracel needs another 92.000 hectares of eucalyptus. The environmental applications for licenses have already been filed. According to ASI Veracel still has a long way to go to obtain the FSC label for the extended land. But SGS Qualifor has the final word on this matter. Manager Sergio Alipio is definitely optimistic: 'If we keep complying with all the principles and criteria of the FSC, as we did up until now, then it's only normal that the new plantations will be certified as well.'

Social and ecological conflicts, the question of indigenous people, problems with food security, rural flight and the decline in farmland are all enhanced by the expansion of eucalyptus, writes IMA, the environment agency of Bahia, in a report in 2008. For that matter, IMA expects that the conflicts will increase due to the coming of BahaBio, a project providing 300.000 hectares of sugarcane and 64.000 hectares of African palm for the production of biofuel in the region. 'There's a desperate need for an integrated vision', the government report concludes.

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