
Argentina: Harvard staunchly defends its tree plantations

Harvard University is the owner, through the Harvard Management Company (HMC), of the world's largest endowment, which handles 32 billion dollars annually. Of this total, around 15% is devoted to forestry investments around the world.

In Argentina, Harvard owns 87,000 hectares of land in the province of Corrientes with pine and eucalyptus plantations that are managed by two companies: Empresas Verdes Argentinas S.A. (EVASA) and Las Misiones S.A.

A system of production based on large-scale tree plantations in Argentina is an ideal way to generate quick profits, for a number of reasons: it employs few workers, and those who are employed work in precarious conditions; it is an activity that receives support from national and provincial governments in the form of tax exemptions and fiscal stability; and the local climate fosters rapid growth of the tree species used, namely pine and eucalyptus.

These HMC investments have drawn criticism from environmental groups and local communities, who have denounced the environmental impacts caused and the land grabs carried out by the companies involved. These denunciations recently reached a wider public when a group of Harvard students and professors conducted research on the plantations and published a report that is critical of their own university's activities in Corrientes (1).

In April, I had the opportunity, along with a small-scale farmer from Iberá, Adrián Obregón (2), to travel to Harvard University, invited by a group of students and professors concerned over the lack of ethics in their university's investments.

There, at a meeting with Lars Peter Knuth Madsen, senior special assistant to the president of Harvard, Kathryn Murtagh, managing director of HMC, and Jameela Pedicini, vice president of sustainable investing at HMC, we were able to hear in person the arguments used by Harvard to defend its investments.

While we were still flying back to Corrientes, Argentina, Andrew Wiltshire (the head of alternative assets at HMC) published a harsh response to our claims, staunchly defending the tree plantations, in the Harvard newspaper The Crimson.

The HMC's entire line of argument is based on the great myths about tree plantations. They essentially equate tree plantations with forests, claim that they help to combat climate change, and maintain that FSC certification of the plantations guarantees environmental sustainability, social equity and corporate responsibility to the community.

But if the extensive worldwide debate and the opinions of various environmental, peasant farmer, indigenous and trade union organizations who challenge these myths have no importance for the managers of the HMC, it is enough to observe what is happening in the concrete case of our territory,

which is what sparked this discussion.

Of the 87,000 hectares owned by the HMC in Corrientes, around 50% are within the Iberá Provincial Nature Reserve, a wetlands ecosystem. They have planted millions of trees in wetlands, savannahs and grasslands with high conservation value, according to reports from the WWF and BirdLife, replacing them with industrial pine plantations where nothing else grows.

The HMC claims that they have created reserves and buffer zones, but these have mostly been established in marginal areas where it is too costly for the company to plant pines. In numerous sites where their own technicians have recommended that they remove the pines and stop planting, they have completely ignored these recommendations, such as in areas where the rare dwarf yatay palm (*Butia Paraguayensis*) grows – a native species classified as extremely vulnerable by the IUCN.

In Corrientes there have been many studies that compare the biodiversity found in areas of extensive cattle farming with that found on tree plantations. A paradigmatic case is that of the coexistence of the Pampas deer with cattle in the wetlands region of Aguapey (on the east coast of Iberá) and the disappearance of this same species resulting from the advance of pine plantations. The “Alianza del Pastizal” (Grasslands Alliance) initiative highlights the benefits for biodiversity of maintaining extensive cattle farming on natural grasslands.

Adrián Obregón, the small farmer representative who spoke face to face with the HMC, is from a place called Montaña in the Iberá wetlands, a rural area that borders on the Santa Julia landholding, owned by Las Misiones S.A. “Many of the residents of Montaña have the Santa Julia plantations right on top of them,” said Adrián. “And also around the Ipacarapá Lagoon, which forms part of our ancestral territory – my grandfather’s house was on the edge of it – the whole area is planted with pine trees now, right up to the water. There is only a small area of native forest left, and we can’t access it without ‘intruding’ on private property. Las Misiones S.A. is the owner of a third of the lagoon,” he added.

Ipacarapá is a central part of Guaraní indigenous culture in the region, a place of recreation, fishing, and a symbol in numerous ancestral legends and myths. Today the physical appearance of the lagoon has been destroyed, and the indigenous population has no way of accessing it. But for the HMC and their certifier Rainforest Alliance, this does not form part of the rights of indigenous peoples. In the FSC certification reports for EVASA and Las Misiones, they simply placed an X meaning “does not apply” in the space referring to indigenous peoples, thus denying their existence.

Another example of the lack of coherence between the discourse of corporate responsibility and the actual management of the plantations on the ground is that of the local rural roads. The timber trucks of Harvard’s plantation companies are primarily responsible for the degradation of these roads. The residents of the town of Chavarría, frustrated with the lack of a response to their complaints, took matters into their own hands and set up a roadblock on Route 22 to keep EVASA’s trucks from getting through.

With regard to the mechanisms for dialogue that are meant to form part of the FSC certification system, they are entirely absent in Corrientes. Misiones S.A. recently obtained certification of its plantations, but on the company’s website (www.lasmisionessa.com.ar), as of May 18, there was no information on this subject nor news of any sort of meeting being organized. In the meantime, the FSC in Argentina website simply does not exist. Meetings with residents of nearby towns were not convened through any other form of media, either.

The demands to Harvard agreed upon by small-scale farmers, workers and environmentalists in the region are simple and clear:

- 1) To permit and guarantee the workers' freedom to organize and to establish a transparent and honest mechanism for them to present their demands for better working conditions to the companies.
- 2) To halt the expansion of its plantations until a genuine, public, participatory and accumulative environmental impact assessment has been conducted for all its plantations.
- 3) To establish a buffer zone between its plantations and small farmers and other local producers.

Notes

1. <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/informe-harvard-argentina>
2. Provincial delegate of the FONAF (Federation of National Family Agriculture Organizations) and vice president of the APPPC (Provincial Association of Small Farmers of Corrientes).

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