
Paraguay: So the forest does not become extinguished – the struggle of the Isolated Ayoreo Groups in the Paraguayan Chaco

In March 2007 a national and international appeal was launched against the imminent clearance and total destruction by the company UMBU S.A. of 24,000 hectares (240 Km²) of untouched pristine forest in the heart of the area known as “Amotocodie” in the North of the Paraguayan Chaco. Amotocodie is part of the ancestral territory of the Indigenous Ayoreo People and continues to be inhabited permanently by two Ayoreo groups living in voluntary isolation. They are groups that have never had contact with modern society and live in their traditional way, in a close relationship of interdependency and mutual support with nature and the forest.

It should be borne in mind that the North of the Paraguayan Chaco is almost entirely in the hands of private owners who are acknowledged by the law and modern world practices to have the right to alter or destroy the Chaco forest, practically with no restrictions or control. The company’s project for land clearance –which is a representative example of many others presently being implemented or in the pipeline in the area- overlaps with and ignores – as if they did not exist –the particular features and contours of the sensitive nature of the Chaco forest and, in this case, interrupting one of the two greatest river courses of Northern Chaco.

At the same time, the project overlaps with another nationally and internationally recognized legal right in force: that of the indigenous ownership of this territory as originating and prior to that of modern states. Amotocodie is indigenous territory. However, the all embracing national and international society has chosen to ignore indigenous territorial rights. If they were to do so, vast stretches of the Chaco forest in Paraguay – presently some 10 million hectares remain intact and pristine – would have the chance to survive our predatory present and would have a future. The Ayoreo are vehemently distant from the asteful and destructive use that white people have made of Ayoreo territory.

“We look after it better. We know how to care for it.” The onslaught of forest clearance for cattle-raising has increased over the past few years as a result of international markets opening up for Paraguayan beef. Additionally, over the past few months, pressure generated by the calamitous expansion of soybean and agro-fuel crops in the Eastern Region of Paraguay, has displaced the expansive interests of the cattle ranchers towards the Western Region, the Chaco, where “available forest still exists.”

The national and international appeal against UMBU S.A.’s project for forest clearance has encouraged numerous people, eminent persons, networks and entities - mostly foreign - to send letters to the Paraguayan authorities asking them to suspend the corresponding clearance permits immediately and to adopt strong and forceful measures to ensure protection of the area and the integrity and rights of the isolated indigenous groups that live there. However, international pressure has had no effect: since the month of August UMBU is clearing the forest at a fast pace. Two months after the onslaught of the bulldozers, 3,000 hectares – 30 Km²., had already been devastated and wiped out.

These 3,000 hectares wiped out were forest areas previously untouched - and still less, violently transformed - by human activities. The river course crossing them brought in abundant water in the rainy season, water that not only gave life to the zone but also to an extensive river basin that stretched from the West of Amotocodie to the Paraguayan Pantanal in areas close to the Paraguay River in the East. This forest clearance has cut off this river flow over a stretch of more than 5 km. With this cut, the flow has been interrupted and stopped functioning as a vital artery of a whole ecosystem condemned to dry up and with it, the wide areas that it irrigated.

The violent intervention of the water course also left without its life base a numerous population of very varied water fowl that visited the area and nested in the gallery forest on both sides of the water course. However, most importantly with these 3,000 hectares, the forest clearance has touched the very heart of one of the most esteemed territories of the Ayoreo People: the Chunguperedatei – a region stretching into the forest on both banks, along the river course. It contains legendary lagoons that never dry up, even during the worst droughts. From time immemorial various local Ayoreo groups spend lengthy periods in this territory, when they interrupt their constant nomadic wandering to plant their summer crops in the fertile sandy soil of the river sediments on both sides of the water course. The 5 km that have been cut, eliminate numerous amotoco – the small natural clearings that are used for these plantations – and annul 5 well-known simijnai, waterholes with fish and ponds which, in the dry season, can be vital for survival.

A land thus annulled, left empty, becomes “extinguished” according to those Ayoreo who had already been deprived of territories with similar forests and who today live precariously in the belts around modern society. With 3,000 hectares already cleared now, part of a whole population’s living places, not only previous ones, but current ones, are becoming extinguished, and with them the paths that marked the migratory routes, the areas to hunt turtles or boars, those to collect honey and those of the caraguata fibre with which the women weave their dreams and visions of life, converting them into bags. Many forest huts used for camping and shelter are extinguished and also the places that marked their lives and told the story of generations: the tree where Orojoide* – former leader of a forest group contacted by force in 1986 – found twenty years later the mark that he had made with his axe when he lived in the forest, before contact, will now also disappear. The living and material references of the life and history of a whole people are being extinguished.

With such extinction, once again the delicate and irreparable unity formed between humans and the world – we call it nature – is broken. It was, or is, a vital unity for both parties. While this text is being written – 12 October – the isolated groups must have withdrawn to places further West or further South that still have life and are intact. However a look at the satellite map of Amotocodie shows that there are various forest clearances going on, and even with a compact centre of intact forest, there must be few places left where the forest Ayoreo people do not hear the distant noise of the bulldozers working day and night. They still determine their wanderings, but in an increasingly conditioned way. Modern society is gradually eating away their self-determination.

From the “outside,” from our world of the all-embracing society, the UNAP (Union of Paraguayan Ayoreo Natives) and the OPIT (Organization of the local Ayoreo Totobiegosode group) are unrelentingly struggling for the protection and legal recognition of the territories that are theirs because they always have been theirs. And they endeavour to give strength to their invisible brothers and sisters, who are carrying out the same work “from the inside”: preventing the forest from becoming extinguished.

*name changed by the author.

By Benno Glauser-mail: bennoglauser@gmail.com, www.iniciativa-amotocodie.org

