
Costa Rica: Business conservationism impacts on rainforest peasants, women and children

Costa Rica has been built as an export-oriented economy, with no political or economic independence. Export pressure on resources by the world system resulted in great inequality. Since the Kyoto Protocol, neoliberals have redefined forests as 'oxygen generators', a concept that Costa Rica has embraced. In this framework, local communities, especially those living in the tropical rainforests and depending for survival on the bounty provided by the forests, have seen undermined their basic support system.

The global environmental crisis has highlighted the fact that forest vegetation stores carbon that, if released, would contribute to trapping heat in the atmosphere, driving up temperatures and speeding up climate change. In the sustainable development framework, forests have become 'natural capital', but in reality they are much more. The forest is an essential mechanism for flood control. In the forest, trees are connected directly to each other through the multitude of creatures that relate to them as food, shelter or nesting place; through their shared access to water, air and sunlight; and through an underground system of fungi that links all the trees as a super-organism. Rainforest people are also members of this super-organism.

So-called sustainable development aggravated the unequal access to resources by intensifying earlier enclosure of the land through the Conservation Area System created in 1989 by the then Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy, and Mines (MIRENEM, now MINAE). Through SINAC (National System of Conservation Areas), the conservation area model was implemented to manage the country's wildlife and biodiversity. The country was divided into 11 conservation areas comprising wildlife, private lands, and human settlements under the current Ministry of Environment and Energy's (MINAE) supervision, expanding the enclosure model by enclosing 25.58% of the national territory. The expropriated land has been organized along the lines of national parks in North America from which people are excluded and denied any role in sustaining the ecosystems. These expropriated lands are linked to transnational and political networks to forge local and global "stakeholders" through categories of management such as Human Patrimony, national parks, wetland, biological reserves, protected zones, forest reserves, and wildlife refuges. At the same time internal boundaries are built, separating local people who share volcanoes, waterfalls, rivers, hot springs, congo-monkeys, and turtle-spawning havens. The enclosed lands become sites for mining, research, ecotourism and selling oxygen.

The Kyoto Protocol introduced a new conceptualization of the world's rainforests. Now they are valued economically in terms of the amount of carbon they sequester. Conservation Areas are considered eligible to receive payments for the "environmental services" they provide. In the Arenal Conservation Area (ACA), organized by the World Wildlife Fund-Canada, national parks such as Arenal Volcano and Tenorio Volcano National Park, and forestry reserves such as Cerro Chato, sell oxygen. But to put the oxygen on the market, in 1994, the previous reserve Arenal Volcano had to be declared Arenal Volcano National Park. From 5 hectares, it was extended to 12,010 ha. As a result, entire communities were forcibly evicted. An injunction, brought to Costa Rica's Supreme Court (Division IV of the judicial system), reported heavy losses by campesinas/os who lived in the Basin

area of the Arenal Conservation Area (ACA). They lost land, pasture, houses, dairies, and roads. Former property owners have become hut renters (ranchos) or slum inhabitants (tugurios). The personal effects of the campesinas/os, such as cars and small electrical appliances, were taken by the commercial banks when they could not afford to repay their loans acquired for economic development. When, in desperation, some of them returned to their land to plant yucca, beans, maize and other subsistence foods, they were declared to have broken the law and some of them were thrown in jail.

The snatching of forest from local communities who use it to sustain themselves has become a death sentence for small and medium-size land holders. As a result, their needs are dismissed, and community members who used to live off the forest are declared enemies of the rainforest. In 1996, La Cuenca de Aguas Claras was also declared a forestry reserve and changes in the area arrived. In 2001, I attended a public Town Hall meeting in La Cuenca de Aguas Claras at which more than 200 farmers, men and women, arrived ready to be interviewed. Since the number was too high, they chose Abel Fuentes and Luis Guimo to speak on their behalf. They declared themselves witnesses of the following account. According to Mr. Fuentes, MINAE says that “our survival way of life is producing deforestation and pollution, and reducing the water level of La Cuenca de Aguas Claras. MINAE exaggerated the level of deforestation to oust almost all the inhabitants because it is reforesting our land in order to sell the oxygen to other countries and get `donations’”. Mr Martin Guimo, another small holder, who still lives within the expropriated land, added “When we ask MINAE officials for information, they decide when and where we can get it. When we propose a meeting, they decide when and where we can meet, then they change the hour, the date, or they cancel the meeting without telling us. Many of us live far from the meeting place and sometimes we have to ride a horse for 3 hours to go to a meeting and it is disappointing to arrive and learn that the meeting has been cancelled” (Guimo, interview, July 2001).

The power of the industrial world to re-design the forest as oxygen producer exacerbates inequalities. As a new structure of accumulation emerges, the disintegration of the ecosystem that supported the means of survival of local communities has powerful effects on the sexual division of labour and women's oppression. When families are violently disintegrated or displaced and impoverished, rural women are encouraged to migrate to San Jose and tourist areas in the hope of earning an income for themselves and their dispossessed families. Introduced into the cash base economy, impoverished women earn all or part of their living as prostitutes. Prostitutes in Costa Rica are women at work supporting children and family members. They are in the market not by choice but out of necessity. Along with them, there are astonishing amount of children who are bought, sold and mistreated by society.

The creditors' power relations, which encourage the commodification of nature, are written in the bodies of the forest, the women and the children of indebted Costa Rica. As dwellers are evicted from their land, dispossessed and vulnerable women and children turn into the sexual tourism industry, forcing them into a new form of slavery in the 21st Century - massive sexual slavery. First world white males, with the complicity of local governments, go to exploit the economic hardships of the inequality crisis created by global capitalism.

This type of ‘solution’ allows the industrial world to continue polluting as long as it can purchase carbon credits from rainforest-dense countries. Meanwhile, emissions produced by an increase in coal and oil burned – mainly in the industrial world – proceed unimpeded. The carbon trade is a colonial relationship with marked class and gender biases that affect the nature of indebted countries, along with subsistence production, and the lives of rainforest women and men.

Excerpted and edited from: "The Tragedy of the Enclosures: An Eco-feminist Perspective on Selling Oxygen and Prostitution in Costa Rica", by Ana Isla, Assistant Professor at Brock University, Canada. She is also a member of Toronto-Women for a Just and Healthy Planet, e-mail: aisla@brocku.ca. The full report is available at http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/CostaRica/Eco-feminist_Perspective_Costa_Rica.pdf.