
Ecuador: Action and proposals against monoculture tree plantations

On 13 May, over 400 young people of both sexes participated in an action against the plantations of the Japanese EUCAPACIFIC Company in the area of Tortuga, located in the Muisne Canton, province of Esmeraldas (see power point presentation of the action at http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/Muisne_sin_eucaliptos.pps)

This action – publicly announced the previous day in Muisne – is framed in the increasing opposition to the company's large-scale monoculture eucalyptus plantations that have deeply affected the region, depleting the water, flora and fauna that had previously been plentiful and used by the local population and evicting the inhabitants from the area.

Among the numerous testimonials gathered in a research work recently concluded and published by the WRM (Granda, Patricia – Monocultivos de árboles en Ecuador – Monoculture tree plantations in Ecuador) the following one summarises the situation, stating:

“The people feel affected... the rivers are drying up, nature is being depleted, animals are fleeing, with what they are planting they destroy everything. Species that were to be found previously are no longer here... People used to go hunting agoutis, rabbits, all that, but now they can't go because there are no forests left to go hunting. All that is nature is fleeing, the animals at least used to have trees where they could live and build their homes, now there is none of this because they have cut it down. Now there is nothing but eucalyptus.”

In the case of the Tortuga, the river that used to run through the village is now just a trickle of stagnant water and people have been obliged to dig a well in the river bed itself to supply themselves with water. This situation is a direct consequence of the plantation of wide stretches of eucalyptus in the area. In this respect, a local inhabitant states:

“This is the Tortuga River, and look at it, it is dry. How long ago did the winter end? Almost no time ago and look at it. Later on there will be no water left. I did not know but now we do know. If from the start we had known that this would cause us damage they would not have planted, we would have stopped them...”

The company has been accused of breaking the law by felling areas of tropical forest to replace them with eucalyptus plantations. An inhabitant of Tortuga tells us how “they cut everything down and only planted that plant [the eucalyptus]. The company felled primary forest and I know because in there, in my land, there was a forest that had been preserved.”

EUCAPACIFIC also violated legal regulations by planting at less than 30 metres from the Tortuga River. The action carried out by the young people consisted in felling – with machetes, axes and chainsaws – some 2000 trees along the strip planted illegally by the company close to the water course. Each time a tree was felled the young people's applause and slogans accompanied it.

José Bautista, an inhabitant of the area said that felling the trees was the last option left open to them

to make the timber company take the issue of the environment seriously. In this respect he told us “We talked to the Minister of the Environment, she came here and said they were going to suspend the permits to plant trees. Then they called us to a meeting with Eucapacific and they said that such plantations did not exist and the Minister believed them.”

That is to say, that the action cannot even be considered as illegal because –according to the company– those trees “did not exist.” In spite of this, the machetes and chainsaws effectively showed that they did exist and that, if justice were to be applied, EUCAPAFIC would have to pay, not only the corresponding fines, but also the work of the young people who eliminated the trees that the company itself should have cut down. However the company has already threatened to launch legal action against the individuals and organizations involved.

In this climate of growing opposition to the plantations, on 17 May the Ecuadorian NGO Acción Ecológica made public its “proposal on tree plantations,” which states the following:

“Acción Ecológica has just published the results of research in which the serious social and environmental impacts caused by monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations are documented, both in the Andean zone and in Esmeraldas. We consider that the findings of this research show the inadvisability of promoting pine and eucalyptus, because:

- 1- They displace peasant populations
- 2- They take vital resources away from local populations
- 3- They occupy food-producing land
- 4- They increase poverty in the areas where they are installed
- 5- They generate fewer jobs than those they displace
- 6- They destroy local economies
- 7- They deplete the area's water resources
- 8- They seriously affect flora and fauna biodiversity
- 9- They degrade forest and Paramo ecosystems
- 10- They contaminate sources of water with chemicals and pesticides.

The National Government is presently discussing a forestry strategy. On the basis of what has been set out above, we want to make public our proposal regarding tree plantations, consisting of the following:

- 1.- We demand the State to take all the necessary measures to stop the expansion of monoculture tree plantations
- 2.- The State must not grant direct or indirect incentives to promote plantations nor should it hand over land in concession for this purpose

3.- All future plantations must be submitted to prior environmental impact assessment and to other mechanisms for environmental management (audits), and should comply with all the environmental standards in force. Prior informed consultation with the communities, including the right to say “NO” should be respected.

4.- The State must force plantation companies to remove the trees from all those planted areas that are affecting Natural Resources and the economies of local populations and to provide environmental and social reparations to the affected populations.

5.- The State must oblige the companies to remove all the trees planted illegally, such as those planted at less than 30 metres from water courses.”

In short, what Acción Ecológica is asking is acknowledgement of the fact that these monoculture tree plantations have a serious impact on people and on the environment and that therefore the State has the obligation to control existing plantations and prevent their continued expansion.

Article based on information from: Ricardo Carrere's report on his trip to Ecuador, May 2006; Granda, Patricia.- Monocultivos de árboles en Ecuador (shortly also available in English) (<http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/Libro2.html>); Acción Ecológica: “Nuestra propuesta sobre plantaciones forestales”; El Comercio newspaper, “Una protesta contra la siembra de eucaliptos, 17/5/06 (<http://www.elcomercio.com/noticia.asp?id=42461&seccion=8>)