Brazil: Veracel fined for crimes against the environment in Bahia

At the end of December 2005, Ibama – Instituto Brasilero del Medio Ambiente y de los Recursos Naturales Renovables (the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) - brought a lawsuit against the Veracel Celulose company. Using satellite imagery and geo-processing, it verified the pulp mill's irregularities and fined it R$ 320.000 for preventing or hindering the natural regeneration of the Mata Atlântica forest over an area of 1,200 hectares and worsening the situation of this biome. This event has again exposed Veracel's fraud and its discourse as protector of the Mata Atlântica.

For many years, NGOs from the Extreme South of Bahia have been denouncing and demanding that federal and state bodies responsible for the Environment - IBAMA and CRA - fulfil their commitments and investigate the various environmental irregularities committed by the Veracel Celulose company, an associate of the Brazilian company Aracruz and the Swedish-Finnish Stora Enso company with the plantation of eucalyptus trees.

Veracel Celulose - formerly Veracruz Florestal - is responsible for several environmental liabilities as can be seen from public civil action nº 93.01.1000399- of 5 April 1993, brought against it by various entities. Greenpeace, Camba – the Bahian Environmental Group and the Centre for Studies and Investigations for the Development of the Extreme South of Bahia (Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas para o Desenvolvimento do Extremo Sul da Bahia–, Cepedes) managed to film how the company destroyed areas of the Mata Atlântica, in medium and advanced levels of regeneration, using chains, tractors and wide-scale burning. All this is a breach of Article 1º of Decree 750 dated February 1993, which states: "Felling, exploitation and supression of primary vegetation or vegetation that is in advanced or medium levels of regeneration in the Mata Atlântica is prohibited."

At its site on the Internet, the company advertises that some of the commitments of the enterprise are "respect for the environment, generation of employment and income, promotion of improvements in the population's quality of life and profitability to its shareholders, following principles of sustainability."

According to Ibama, the Mata Atlântica has 383 endangered species of fauna and of these, 125 run the risk of disappearing. In the Extreme South the situation is very serious because monoculture eucalyptus plantations are using vast tracts of flat land, leaving just a few islands of craggy areas as wildlife "refuges." Many species do not live in or are not adapted to uneven areas and are therefore becoming locally extinct, particularly the endemic and rare species. To make matters worse, there is no connectivity between the islands of native vegetation, set in a sea of eucalyptus trees. Eucalyptus plantations do not represent an ecological corridor, because as we environmentalists, scientists, business people and government technicians, etc. know, the species do not cross or use eucalyptus plantations.

In the name of "development" of the region, the remaining biological heritage of the Mata Atlantica is being destroyed, causing indignation and protests from the organized civil society. The lack of consideration and greed of the promoters of this "development" model, government and

entrepreneurs, foster crimes that attack nature and society, robbing future generations of the right to biodiversity, to scenic beauty and to a quality of life, in favour of a few groups and people getting wealthier. Periodically we have seen the Finnish Ambassador on Brazilian television stating that Finland is the country with the best quality of life in the world. However, groups from this country promote destruction and misery in the countries of the South through projects lacking transparency and respect that are imposed on the population.

Another issue of concern is related with the companies' compliance with all the conditions. These conditions are prepared by the bodies granting permits for eucalyptus plantations and the construction of the pulp mills, after taking into account the various impacts caused by the enterprise. However, later the entities do not control these conditions as they should because, as they themselves admit, they do not have the technical capacity to ensure follow-up. In the knowledge of these government shortcomings, the companies take advantage of the situation and commit abuses.

The investigation carried out in the communities surrounding the Veracel factory, at the time it was built, enabled CEPEDES to discover that the company did not use the inhabitants of these communities' labour at any time. The company, using financed money, including inputs from BNDES (Banco Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social) built housing in the neighbouring cities and districts, such as Itagimirim, Itapebi and Barrolandia and brought in workers from other regions of the country. Once the factory was built many returned to their region of origin and others stayed behind. This ends up by causing more unemployment, misery and violence.

This episode shows how the company's environmental discourse is very different from its practice. We may affirm, on the basis of our experience over these almost fourteen years that the only true consideration on the part of the company is that which has to do with profitability for its shareholders as we have been able to verify through various declarations that their profits are increasing. The vice-president of Stora Enso, Magnus Diesen is already considering duplication of the model as a fait accompli and has declared that "a major step forward for the company would be a probable Veracel II. The additional capacity of the unit could somewhat exceed our present production, thanks to technological development. We would thus reach a little over double the volume we produce today." This is a matter for concern as the Extreme South of Bahia can no longer support the vast monoculture eucalyptus plantations and that already existing problems are incalculable.

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