
Chile: Urgent need to reorient forestry policy from tree monocultures to forests

In these times of increasingly fast processes linked to technological development, we are also witnessing an equally vertiginous loss of natural resources due to over-exploitation enabling a way of production, consumption and lifestyle that closes a vicious circle.

In this framework, the gradual loss of native forests is not a minor question, above all because it is irreparable. In an urban context, it may be hard for the ordinary citizen --removed from the cycles and pace of nature's processes and their observation and experience-- to notice what is happening, in the case of Chile in the southern region. Perhaps when the ordinary citizen does learn about it, it may be too late.

However, before going into details, it is important to point out that what is happening in Chile is by no means an isolated case. The situation is very similar in many other countries, where monoculture tree plantation is promoted while forests continue to be destroyed and, in many cases, substituted by monocultures of alien species. It is also essential to recognize what is going on in this country, in view of the fact that the "Chilean model" is being promoted in Latin America as a successful example to be imitated by other governments, in spite of the fact that it is a model that has already shown itself to be socially and environmentally unsustainable.

Chile has signed and ratified a series of international conventions, protocols and treaties: on Biodiversity, on Desertification, on Climate Change, on the Ozone Layer, Agenda 21, the Montreal Process with the Santiago Charter and many more. These would be dead without a forestry policy and the institutionality able to put them into practice.

Additionally, processes such as the Free Trade Treaties signed recently only contribute to make forest deterioration and its possible disappearance take place faster because of the lack of regulations, and of the guidelines promoting increased tree plantations, today the second largest Chilean export product, though at the expense of its people and its environment.

Two companies concentrate over one million 300 thousand hectares covered by large-scale monoculture tree plantations and the total amount of these plantations covers 2 million, 200 thousand hectares. This issue has had an enormous social and environmental impact, causing the migration of communities in wide rural sectors and impoverishment of peasants. Delicate socio-economic problems have arisen in ARAUCANIA, where serious conflicts between forestry companies and indigenous communities and small farmers continue to take place.

To the detriment of native forests, the plantation of alien species continues to be promoted. Decree Law 701 benefits the wrongly called "reforestation," by foreseeing economic benefits, nominally reaching up to 90% of the plantation costs in the case of smallholdings in non-agricultural or degraded lands, without making practically any discrimination between forestation with native species and plantation of alien species. And now, even greater facilities exist. This year 13 million dollars have been allocated towards Forestry Security Bonds (for the plantation of pine and eucalyptus on

the land of small landowners), an instrument created by the Fundación Chile together with the Wood Corporation (Corporación de la Madera), the Development Corporation (Corporación de Fomento) and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, the bill on native forests, which will perhaps be sent to Congress shortly, only contemplates 5 million dollars as State contribution for the first year. The Lake Region, where the forests with the most biodiversity are located, is rapidly becoming a monotonous landscape of pines and eucalyptus to supply the enormous cellulose plant presently being built by the Arauco Company in San Jose de la Mariquina.

Those denouncing this state of affairs consider that access to information, dissemination and education regarding native forests must be improved for there to be a culture of conservation and sustainable use and that in order to support the National Strategy for Biodiversity Conservation to preserve ecosystems, a list of priority sites must be urgently identified, achieving compliance with national laws and international treaties ratified by Chile for the protection of natural resources and contemplating a definition of forests with an ecological criterion.

It would seem that in Chile, no forestry policy exists (in the sense of sustainable forest use) and that what there is, is in fact is a policy aimed almost exclusively at the promotion of monoculture tree plantations. What is even worse is that this policy has been so successful that wide areas of forest have disappeared, substituted by unending lines of pine and eucalyptus, that someone very aptly defined as "planted militia": green, in line and advancing.

This lack of a policy for the conservation of forests has been corroborated in numerous reports, the latest being the Country Report 2000, carried out by the University of Chile for the National Environmental Commission (<http://www.elbosquechileno.cl/infpais34.html>).

The time has come to end the illusion that pine and eucalyptus plantations are "forests." Plantations are plantations and forests are forests. It is that easy. No monoculture tree plantation can fulfil any of the social and environmental functions fulfilled by Chilean forests. For this reason, the urgent adoption of a real forest legislation is urgent to ensure the sustainable use and restoration of the only Chilean forestry resource: the native forest.

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