
Brazil: The need to avoid eucalyptus causing the same damage in Sao Paulo as it has done in Minas Gerais

In spite of the fact that it is one of the country's most wretched zones, the Valley of Jequitinhonha in Minas Gerais has been the main and paradigmatic goal of the "citizen caravans" of the candidate Lula --in more than one of his presidential campaigns-- and one of the zones chosen to play the new government's strong card --the Hunger Zero plan-- it is odd to note that nothing has been said about the concrete reason (in addition to generic reasons due to socio-economic and perhaps political underdevelopment) that has led this part of the territory of Minas Gerais to such a degraded and economically unsustainable condition. However, some testimonies by representative personalities in the region, during radio interviews on the occasion of the visit by the presidential committee, reported that some 26 years ago the Jequitinhonha was a fertile valley, with many crops and cattle raising and that it started "drying up" due to the substitution of native forests by the indiscriminate plantation of eucalyptus.

Faced by the dramatic previsions of the UNESCO report on the diminishing of springs over the next 20 years --a report submitted to the 3rd World Water Forum held in Kyoto-- and facing the possibility that all the remnants of biodiversity will be damaged, together with the water resources available to supply the largest (and most important) Brazilian city, it would be valuable to discuss the risks of the rapid and on-going substitution of riparian native forests by eucalyptus plantations in the municipalities close to the city, such as Nazaré Paulista --where the Atibainha dam is located, the main spring of the Cantareira System-- Piracaia, Joanopolis and others. Because in this zone, mainly over the past five years, a beautiful and varied native vegetation that harbours natural springs, streams and small rivers and is the habitat of a wealth of wildlife, has given way to monotonous lines of identical trees, that have nothing to attract birds --or any other species of fauna-- and that are quickly cut down to be used as firewood. Only a few areas are left that have resisted illegal logging or the sterile "reforestation" of eucalyptus "cultivation." These are not trees benefiting the cellulose industry --as the zone does not have one nor would it be feasible due to its characteristics-- and still less do such plantations respond to technical criteria for the redistribution and/or preservation of a percentage of native forests. It is only wood that has drunk a lot of water, but that can only be used as firewood...

In the old controversy over the environmental effects of eucalyptus plantations, in spite of the arguments --generally based on scientific work sponsored by major companies that industrially exploit this tree-- endeavouring to present as simple "myths" the damage caused by eucalyptus to soil fertility and to springs, ample bibliography exists proving at least three basic aspects: this tree's high demand for water can deplete ground humidity and harm ground-water recharge, destabilizing the water cycle; the great intake of nutrients by the roots can generate a major deficit in the soil and destabilize the nutrient cycle; the release of chemical substances --or alelopathic effects on the micro-flora-- can alter plant and micro-organism growth and further reduce soil fertility.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and many other international bodies, in addition to universities and European, Indian, Australian and South African scientific institutes, have discussed the issue at length, but very often environmental concerns clash with the interests of

industrial groups that rely on this tree of Australian origin, which started to be grown in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century (and in Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century). Already in 1887, there were reports in South Africa --one of the first countries to establish large-scale eucalyptus plantations-- testifying that the climate of the country was becoming dryer, the previously abundant water sources were decreasing and the watercourses were becoming intermittent.

One hundred years later, in 1987, the Portuguese author, Antero Gonçalves wrote a book with the title of "Eucalyptus and Man," in which he states: "It is not worth continuing to repeat that the eucalyptus is against human beings, it is against the land, it is against water, it is against everything. It is hard to understand how the people in the countryside accept tranquilly and quietly that the best arable lands are corrupted by the infernal globule [*Eucalyptus globulus*] that threatens to turn us into a desert." In Spain a movement exists promoting the plantation of native species, called the Phoracantha Club, in homage to the beetle [the longhorned borer] that destroys eucalyptus trees.

It is not without reason that the laws of many countries restrict this type of plantation. In Brazil, a law has been adopted in Espírito Santo, prohibiting new plantations of eucalyptus in this state. It would be advisable for São Paulo to also establish similar restrictions, at least in areas with important springs, such as the one mentioned above, and thus avoid witnessing in a few years time the still diversified (and not desertified) parts of the Nazare Paulista vegetation --with its native forests, its natural springs, its birds, its monkeys and even wildcats, at only one hour from the capital-- converted into a desolated Jequitinhonha that only lends itself to the visit of tearful caravans of future presidential campaigns, while in São Paulo we will have to buy drinking water at the price of gold (or of clean air).

By: Mauro Chaves, e-mail: mauro.chaves@attglobal.net, accessed from: Biodiversidad en América Latina, <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/prensa8/prensa962.htm>.