
[Chile: Mapuche defend their land from forestry companies](#)

The Mapuche held off European incursions onto their land for centuries. Now, relegated to reservations --called "reductions"-- most Mapuche work as impoverished farmers or field hands or live as a marginalized minority in Chilean cities. However, they are fighting back. "Our objective is the recuperation of the territory of the Mapuche people," Ancalaf, 40, said in a jailhouse interview with journalist Héctor Tobar of the Los Angeles Times. "We want to control our destiny and shape our future according to the cosmology of our people."

Held without trial since November under anti-terrorism laws passed during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, which deprive detainees of the right to a speedy trial and allow prosecutors to withhold evidence from defense attorneys, Ancalaf and a dozen other militant leaders have become heroes to many Mapuche, even those who disagree with their tactics.

In the Chilean media, the modern "Mapuche conflict" is most often portrayed as a struggle between the order and reason of the country's European heritage and an indigenous culture dominated by "superstition" and violence. Smoldering for decades, the conflict over land began to catch fire again in the late 1990s. Many view the globalisation of the Chilean economy and the government's free-trade policies as the cause. The grain and dairy farms that were once the cornerstone of the regional economy have been hard hit by cheaper US exports and many farmers are forced to leave land fallow or sell out to the forestry companies.

Mapuche lands are increasingly covered or surrounded by eucalyptus and pine planted in old wheat fields or where native forests stood. Most of the trees planted in the region are Monterey pine --a species native to California-- and eucalyptus from Australia, and are harvested by machine, processed into lumber and paper pulp and sent to North American and Asian markets. The concentration of large-scale fast-growing plantations causes ground water to disappear and wildlife is affected by the lack of undergrowth crucial to its survival. A number of species of native trees, integral to Mapuche production and cultural activities, are being driven toward extinction. According to one Chilean government study, all native trees outside national parks could disappear by 2015.

In November, Mapuche activist Edmundo Lemun, 17, was shot and killed by police during a protest at tree farms in Ercilla (see WRM Bulletin 64). On January 20, more than a dozen hooded Mapuche with homemade shotguns and Molotov cocktails invaded forestry company Mininco workers' camp outside the town, setting fire to the living quarters.

As elsewhere, water shortages contribute to the conflict. "Twenty years ago, I don't think anyone in our community imagined that one day we would have to bring in water trucks to provide for the basic needs of our families," said Alfonso Rayman, a leader of the Nagche Mapuche, a subgroup that includes several communities around Lumaco. A few days earlier, in a small act of defiance, a group of boys had set a fire in a hillside meadow near the town, Rayman said with a slight smile. The blaze ran up the hillside and killed hundreds of saplings. Today, several leaders from the Lumaco area are behind bars, charged with destroying forest company property.

However, no institutional authority condemns the clear-cutting of Mapuche property --their land, their forests-- carried out by forestry companies in order to make way for their large-scale monoculture tree plantations. As Chilean activist, defender of forests Malú Sierra denounces (see WRM Bulletin 66) "Chile is a mountainous country and therefore clear-cutting, which always has a negative impact on soils, is twice as serious here". On the contrary, some of those companies are entitled to go on with their profitable business under the label of "certified" plantations by FSC standards. And even worse, in the case of the Millalemu company, it is being nominated to the National Environment Award granted annually by the Chilean National Environment Commission!

Things are clearly upside down. The traditional owners of the land are evicted and imprisoned for taking action to get it back. The companies responsible for the social and environmental destruction of the region are certified and nominated for environmental awards. A real farce. However, in spite of all their power, forestry companies are increasingly isolated in a growing sea of Mapuche protest. Which will certainly continue to grow.

Article based on information from: "Where Forests Are Foes", Héctor Tobar, Los Angeles Times, March 12, 2003, sent by MAPUEXPRESS - INFORMATIVO MAPUCHE, e-mail: mapuche@mapuexpress.net, <http://www.mapuexpress.net> ; "Postulan al Premio Nacional de Medio Ambiente a forestal certificada por FSC", Comunicaciones ICEFI press release, e-mail: prensa@icefi.cl