
Chile: Resistance against a highway that will destroy forests and peoples

Hidden in the midst of remote mountains on the South Pacific coast of Chile, is the last remnant of intact coastal forest, one of the most diverse ecosystems of Latin America. It is estimated that one third of the temperate forests existing in the world are to be found in the Southern zone of Chile and Argentina. The Chilean temperate forest, protected from the glaciers by the Coastal Cordillera, is the remnant of what was once the widespread Valdivia forest. The Coastal Cordillera has ecosystems that have existed with minimum human intervention for thousands of years and that are a unique natural and cultural heritage. It is an area that is recognised as one of the 25 ecosystems in the world, concentrating unique elements. In addition to harbouring the huillin (river otter) in its rivers and the only forests of "olivillo" (*Aextoxicon punctatum*), an endemic species that only exists in the Valdivia forest, the Coastal Cordillera is -- in the context of cultural diversity-- the ancestral home of the Mapuche Huilliche Indigenous communities.

In mid 2001, the Chilean government decided to continue with a project for building the Coastal Highway, resisted for a long time now, both at local and international levels. This highway threatens to destroy large areas of pristine forests in this amazing eco-region, through a combination of clear cutting and substitution by alien species, wood extraction and preparation of lands for cattle-raising.

Important forestry companies are behind the construction of this 320 km long highway, the second to link the country from North to South, which would pounced disastrous impacts on the forests and the people. The Huilliche peoples are strongly opposed to this. "The health of the Mapuche people is in the forest. The logging companies have already done much damage, they have felled and burnt the best wood to replace it with pine and eucalyptus. The pellin oak, the lingue, the laurel trees, the coigüe and the olivillo have all disappeared. We no longer hear the birds singing and the water and the soil have been spoilt. We do not want any more contamination." These are the words of Anselmo Paillamangue, lonko (head) of Cuinco, who is working in defence of eighteen communities and who belongs to the Coalición de Organizaciones Ciudadanas para la Conservación de la Cordillera de la Costa (Coalition of Citizen Organizations for the Conservation of the Coastal Cordillera – CCCC). "We have suffered the most terrible arbitrary treatment from individuals and national and transnational companies; laws favouring us have been abolished and fraudulent purchases have multiplied. The highway will cause great ecological damage and will kill us as a people; for this reason we are not prepared to accept it.

During the winter of 2003, with his poncho wet through from the rain, Martin Paillamanque, lonko of Maicolpi, representative of ten communities of the coastal sector of San Juan de la Costa, came before the Environmental Commission of the National Congress, telling the deputies: "Deterioration and even extermination of the communities is being caused in the name of development. A serious and diligent work of research has been carried out, establishing that the communities are against the construction of the coastal highway through our territory. We will oppose it to the end, and if the State insists, we will know where we stand. We want development, but with identity and we will continue to oppose a project that does not favour us. We will fight to prevent the communities from being split up and to prevent our rights being violated. For this purpose we are proposing alternatives.

Recently and in pursuance of the Agreement on Environmental Co-operation between Chile and Canada, signed by both governments in 1997, various Chilean organisations have lodged a legal petition of an international nature with the aim of achieving that the Commission for Chilean-Canadian Environmental Co-operation (ACACC) investigates the serious violation of environmental legislation with regard to the process of environmental assessment and construction of the Southern Coastal Highway, developed by the Ministry of Public Works (MOP) in the Tenth Region.

According to the petitioners' lawyer, Miguel Fredes of CEADA "so far there is no precedent of any other claim submitted to investigation by the Commission recording such a high rate of violations to environmental legislation as is the case of the Southern Coastal Highway."

Waldemar Monsalve, one of the petitioners, who has been denouncing the illegal operations of the MOP for a long time now, states that the construction of the Coastal Highway has caused serious environmental damage in the Osorno zone. "Furthermore, with the documentation attached to the petition, we can prove that the MOP's Highway Office caused the illegal felling of native forests in the protected area of the Contaco river in Osorno in 1998."

Among other things, it is requested that the MOP be sanctioned for its lack of compliance with the conditions for the approval of the Southern Coastal Highway and that the Highway Office and the Rio Bueno Building Company be sanctioned for the environmental damage caused to the Contaco river and to its hydro-biological resources.

Unless immediate measures are taken to protect it, the story of the native forest of the Coastal Cordillera in the Tenth Region of the Lakes will be the same as that of the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth regions of Chile, where the wealth of temperate forest flora and fauna has practically disappeared, where the forest has been replaced by what are really green deserts of industrial plantations of alien species such as the pine and the eucalyptus.

The Huilliche people do not really trust the authorities who have always relegated them. For this reason they have told the authorities that "Our lonkos have always existed, long before the arrival of the Spanish conquest. We have not just arrived and we will fight for our rights."

Article based on information from: Coalición para la Conservación de la Cordillera de la Costa, e-mail: coalicioncc@terra.cl , <http://www.ccc.terra.cl> taken from Defensores del Bosque Chileno, <http://www.elbosquechileno.cl> , information sent by Miguel Fredes, Centro Austral de Derecho Ambiental (CEADA), e-mail: ceada@entelchile.net , <http://www.ceada.org> .