
Colombia: Community stops a mining license in forest reserve

In the Planalto forest reserve in Colombia, the 180 species of diurnal butterflies found until today, can go on flying, the ten genres of Melolonthidae beetle will go on scratching the soil, and also the ants that live there and form part of all the subfamilies in the neotropics will continue their work. The flight of the 160 different species of birds, 9% of the total species identified in Colombia, will continue uninterrupted. All this will be possible thanks to the action of the people living in the reserve area and those who supported their struggle.

The Planalto reserve spreads over 100 hectares, in one of the ends of the city of Manizales; it comprises the biggest stretch of forest located in the pre-montane and very humid tropical life zones of the municipality. A high percentage of the plants that grow in the area cannot be found in other forest stretches, and with regards to bird species, less than 55% are in other forest areas within the same life zone, and some of them, such as the white-tipped sicklebill, seem to be restricted to this forest within the municipality.

For decades, the coffee region of Colombia, where the Planalto reserve is located, has been subject to severe transformations of its mountain ecosystems, mainly to prepare land for coffee monoculture, although there is now a trend towards crop diversification and the recovery of traditional forms of production --such as under-shade coffee-- due to the crisis of the agricultural sector, something which is to be expected when the economy of a region depends solely on one product. This process has produced the disappearance of most of the native forests on the stretch between 1,000 and 2,000 metres above sea level, a fact that has been worsened by the dynamics of colonization and concentration of population in the area (near 70% of the Colombian people live in the Andean region).

On the other hand, the tropical Andes have been proposed as one of the 15 "hotspots" or priority areas for conservation at world level, home to 30%-40% of the biological diversity of the earth.

But --as usual-- neither all the above reasons, nor the declaration of the reserve as "area of environmental interest" in the land plan of the municipality hindered the company INGEOCOM Ltda to take the first steps to obtain a mining license within the reserve.

On June 16, 2000 the company asked for the permits needed for the exploitation of amphibolitic rock in the Planalto in a 12-hectare quarry, in which it projected to obtain a minimum annual production of 10 thousand cubic metres.

Voices of protest rose at once, and the community expressed its strong rejection regarding the possibility of having a mine within the reserve. Initially it was the Centro de Investigaciones de Café (Coffee Research Centre), that owns the land, who defended the conservation of the area, arguing that it was an area dedicated to research and protection of biodiversity. The members of the community in general, as well as students and academics adhered to the protest. Nevertheless, a year later the project already had the exploitation license granted by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, and the only requirement pending to start mining operations was the environmental license;

such license was applied for on June 19, 2001 to CORPOCALDAS, the environmental authority of the municipality.

On August 22, the company suffered its first setback: Corpocaldas recommended not to continue with the project because it was not environmentally feasible, and the representative of the company asked Corpocaldas to reconsider its decision. The reserve defenders intensified their struggle, and the situation came to the attention of many people who sent messages to Corpocaldas, even from abroad, requesting the refusal of the license. Conservation-linked people from the research centre in which the reserve is located produced a document which clearly shows the importance of the preservation of the reserve for the city and for the region, in terms of conservation, education and research.

As a result of the pressure, the environmental authority was forced to call to a public audience in December in order to listen to both parties; this audience finally became one of the milestones of the environmental struggle in the region, both due to its scope and for the massive attendance of all community sectors, which wanted to show their commitment and contribute to the achievement of a collective aim which was also theirs.

Finally, the victory was for the friends of biodiversity, which at last heard from Corpocaldas the answer they hoped for: “the license for the mining exploitation in the Planalto is not granted”, a decision ratified by Resolution No. 0193 on February 5, 2002.

This is not only the success of life prevailing over particular interests, but also an important step towards the consolidation of aims which are of interest for the community as a whole, that is now realizing the importance and power of collective action, and the significance of asserting its rights and beliefs. This success is underscored by the fact that the decision was made by a corporation with a well-known tradition of political tampering, that nevertheless was not able to prevail over the peoples' power.

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