Uruguay: An example of FAO's "expertise" on forests

The FAO is portrayed by many as the expert body on forests. One single example will suffice to question FAO's alleged expertise. The organization's web page includes a "country profile" area containing the basic data on the countries' forest resources and we would recommend everyone to compare what the FAO says with what they know about their own country. In the case of Uruguay, the FAO says:

"Uruguay is lightly forested with around 6 percent forest cover. The country is comprised principally of a large undulating plain rising to a low mountain range, the serrianas, in the eastern third of the country. The natural vegetation is primarily prairie grass though nearly 90 percent of the land is in some agricultural use. The country´s natural forests are predominantly low temperate scrubland forests, typified by the Bosque de Parque and the Bosque Serrano. Prosopis spp. are common in more open woodland. Palm-hardwood associations occur in the south-east and north central regions. Commercial species include urunday (Astronium fraxinifolium) and lapacho (Tabebuia serratifolia). Smaller areas of riverine and swamp forest and mixed coniferous forests also occur. Around 40 percent of Uruguay´s forest area is plantation forest. Eucalyptus (82%) and Pinus (17%) are the principal plantation genera. Uruguay has a small area of protected forest areas."

The above summary contains a number of serious mistakes, among which we would like to highlight the following:

- The two commercial species mentioned --urunday (Astronium fraxinifolium) and lapacho (Tabebuia serratifolia)-- don't even exist in the country

- The country's predominant forests are neither Bosque de Parque nor Bosque Serrano. Most of the forests are riverine (Bosque ribereño), which accompany most of the numerous water courses that cross the country in all directions. The FAO fails to mention two other types of forests: Bosque de quebrada (Ravine forest) and Bosque de Arenales (forest associated to sand dunes)

- The FAO says that "Prosopis spp. are common in more open woodland." Prosopis are in fact one of the major components of the Bosque de Parque, a savanna-like association --a "more open woodland"-- existing to the West of the country along the river Uruguay and its tributaries

- "Mixed coniferous forests" don't occur at all. There are no native conifers in Uruguay. What the FAO characterises as such are invasions of alien Pinus pinaster and Acacia longifolia --and other exotics-- resulting from prior plantations aimed at containing the movement of the coastal sand dunes

- The FAO states that "Palm-hardwood associations occur in the south-east and north central regions." These associations probably did exist in the past. However, they are currently almost exclusively composed of one palm species in the south-east --Butia capitata-- and another palm species in the north-west-- Butia yatay, both under threat of extinction due to cattle-raising

- As usual, the FAO's definition of forests --which incorrectly includes tree plantations as such--

confuses the issue of "forest cover". Uruguay has a 3% of forest cover (more than 600,000 hectares) and some 500,000 hectares of eucalyptus and pine monoculture tree plantations. It is estimated that the country used to have at least 6% of its territory covered by forests. The FAO's figure thus hides the fact that half of the country's forests have been eliminated, while most of the plantations have been implemented in the predominant prairie ecosystem, where forests did not exist before.

The above clearly indicates --if the case of Uruguay can be generalised-- that the FAO is not as expert as people have been made to believe. Anyone wishing to check what the FAO says on their own country, can find the relevant information at the following address: