USA: Where plantations are clearly not forests

Few people know that the Southern US is currently the largest wood and paper producing region in the world. Successful efforts to protect the last remnants of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, resulted in the expansion of the industry into the recovering second-growth forests of the South. In the last 10 years, more than 100 industrial-scale wood-chipping facilities have been constructed in this region, while paper production alone has increased by one-third since 1985. Approximately 5 million acres of forests are clearcut every year in the region for paper.

The Southern US is now home to one-half of all the world's industrial tree plantations (approximately 30 million acres, some 12 million hectares) and experts are projecting a doubling of plantations over the next 20 years. Already, 40% of the native pine forest throughout the region have been turned into monoculture plantations. Industry experts project that number to increase to 70% by 2020.

Despite all the fast-growing plantations, pine trees (the species of choice for plantations) are currently being cut faster than they grow according to the US Forest Service. And while industry argues that plantations take pressure of natural forests, experts project that removals of the region’s natural hardwood forests will exceed growth within the decade.

There is very little old growth forest remaining in the region, as virtually all the forests were logged by the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the region’s recovering second-growth native forests are the most biologically diverse in North America as they escaped glaciation during the last ice age. These forests contain the highest concentrations of tree, other terrestrial and aquatic species' diversity on the continent.

Not only are diverse natural forests being converted to fast-growing plantations, but wetlands are being drained to make way for plantations as well. These plantations are being sprayed via airplanes with chemical fertilizers and herbicides. In addition, large timber companies (International Paper, Georgia-Pacific, Weyerhaeuser, Westvaco etc.) are positioning the Southern US as an international focal point in genetic engineering (GE) of trees.

Not only is this impacting the ecology of the region, but it is also having an adverse impact on local communities --it is as much a social issue as it is an environmental one. Communities surrounding large industrial plantations tend to be economically depressed, having higher than average poverty rates and lower expenditures on public education.

There are no laws in place in the Southern US to prevent the conversion of forests to plantations, as the largest timber companies in the world are concentrated in this region of the globe and have undue influence over the political system. In fact, the current policies actually encourage and subsidize the conversion of forests to plantations.

The good news is that there now is a very strong, diverse coalition of groups across the region (including religious leaders, recreation businesses, local saw mill owners, local concerned citizen groups and forest protection groups) working together to stop the expansion of industrial forestry with

a long-term goal of eliminating unsustainable, industrial forestry practices altogether. The Dogwood Alliance --a coalition of 70 organizations across the Southern US-- is currently working in two areas:

1- Government Policy: to stop the further expansion of the industry and secure legal protections for forests at the state level. There is currently a moratorium on the licensing of new wood chipping facilities in the state of Missouri, and it is now more difficult for a company to get a permit for a chip mill in the State of North Carolina. Collectively, the Alliance has stopped the construction of seven chip mills since 1991.

2- Corporate Markets: to take pressure off forests by shifting markets away from products derived from unsustainable practices and towards alternatives.

The Alliance --together with organizations such as Rainforest Action Network-- was successful in convincing Lowe's (the second largest retailer of wood products in the US) to discourage their suppliers from converting forests to plantations.

The coalition is also involved in a national campaign (in partnership with Forest Ethics) targeting Staples (the largest office supply retailer in the world) to get them to become a leading global retailer of high, post-consumer content recycled paper products.

With less than 20% of the world’s old growth forests remaining, we must recognize that protecting old growth forests alone will not be enough to sustain the Earth’s biodiversity. There are still well-intentioned groups and individuals working to protect old growth forests that believe plantations are a part of the solution to the world’s forest crisis. One needs only to understand the situation in the Southern US to know that plantations do not offer protection for forests; they destroy them.

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