
The Colombian Chocó: A megadiverse region in a megadiverse country . . . for how long?

The Chocó Biogeographical Region comprises an area of some 75,000 square kilometres on the Pacific Coast of Colombia, spreading from Panamá to Ecuador. Due to a combination of evolutionary, ecological, climatic and geologic factors, this region presents the highest biodiversity concentration per area in the world. Between 7,000 and 8,000 out of the 45,000 species registered in Colombia are found in the Chocó. Endemic plant species are more than 2,000 while endemic birds comprise more than 100 species, which represent the highest endemism levels in the Planet. Afrocolombian communities living in the area have developed a rich culture in harmony with the environment in that tropical environment. It is a biodiverse region in a biodiverse country.

Forests existing in the region have been classified into two groups according to their composition: homogeneous and heterogenous formations. The first ones comprise those where a single species is dominant. It is the case of the "catival", the mangroves and the "naidí", dominated respectively by the "cativo" (*Prioria copaifera*), the "mangle" (*Rhizophora* spp) and the "naidí" (*Euterpe oleoracea*). Heterogeneous forests are composed by a diversity of species according to the altitude gradient, which at the same time are associated with different rainfall volumes.

All of the estimations of forest cover carried out until now are coincidental: the region is suffering a severe process of deforestation. Only about 40% of the original forest cover is still standing. Colonization, expansion of the agricultural frontier, cattle raising and logging are the factors explaining the present state of things. Nevertheless, the root cause is to be found in the unfair access to the land and natural resources that reigns not only in this region but in the whole of Colombia. From the Spanish Conquest onwards, the Colombian Pacific Region has been subject to the relentless extraction of its natural resources --such as gold, clay, balsam and several precious woods-- in a process that did not generate any benefits to local people. With political independence the situation did not change. As a matter of fact, the conquest of the territory by the Colombian modern state during the so called periods of "liberalization of nature" (1850-1930) and "modernization of nature" (1930-1970), implied further pressure on the territory of the Biogeographical Chocó.

Not only is natural biodiversity under threat but also the diversity of cultures that have coexisted with it. For example, the destruction of the "catival" forests to the hands of private companies is menacing their livelihoods and living space. In some cases --as that of the Forcibly Displaced Afro-Colombian Communities of the Cacarica Basin-- entire communities had to leave their lands and homes, occupied by logging companies, trying to save their lives in a new place. The situation has been referred to as an ecocide.

Land tenure and social and environmental-related conflicts have been a tragic constant in Colombian history. The situation of the Embera and the U'wa indigenous people, who have seen their lands invaded by "developers" and been subjects to all types of violations of human rights, including murder, as well as the massive destruction of the forests by illegal crops and its repression --now enhanced by the Plan Colombia-- together with the accelerated deforestation of the precious Chocó

Region are alarming signs of an endless process that is undermining biodiversity. Whether Colombia --and the Chocó Biogeographic Region-- are to be considered in the future as biodiverse territories is increasingly dubious.

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