
Brazil: The short memory of Veracel and the power of Aracruz

In response to the information published by Taiga Rescue Network in Taiga News Summer 2000 edition, issue 32, regarding the social and environmental impacts of Veracel's eucalyptus plantations in the state of Bahia, Antonio Alberto Prado --Public Affairs Manager of the company-- addressed the publishers to explain them that " . . . since its inception, in 1991, Veracel's land management and plantation development has been based on sustainable, ecologically sound principles". According to him, when Veracel arrived in the region the native Atlantic Forest ("mata atlantica") had mostly disappeared. "The areas used for planting", he states, "are those that have already suffered irreversible interference from man, being mainly pastures and degraded areas." He adds that Veracel is undertaking a conservation programme for the native forests remnants and that "the resultant landscape is typified by the forest mosaic of eucalyptus on plateaus with native forests in the intersecting valleys." He also adds that the presence of Veracel was "welcomed by the local population as a unique opportunity to preserve and restore the native forest while providing jobs for a population with roots in forest operations."

To say the least, Mr Prado seems to have an extremely short memory. Fortunately, the "welcomed" arrival of his company was well documented by the Brazilian NGOs FASE, IBASE and CDDH-Teixeira de Freitas, which carried out extensive research from 1992 to 1996 on the impacts of the expansion of eucalyptus monocultures in northern Espirito Santo and southern Bahia.

In 1992 the company arrived to southern Bahia under the name of VeraCruz Florestal, with the aim of setting up eucalyptus plantations and a pulp mill. One year later a group of Brazilian environmental and social NGOs together with SINTREXBEM --the union of forestry workers-- denounced that the company was devastating the mata atlantica forest, one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world, and filed a suit against the company. In February 1993 VeraCruz Florestal had its operations temporarily suspended by the Ministry of the Environment and the Brazilian Justice for breaching the environmental law for the protection of the mata atlantica. All this is very well documented in a number of publications which Mr Prado should have read before responding to Taiga News and among which we recommend him the "Dossie Veracruz", published in 1993.

However, Mr Prado appears to know nothing about that and prefers to underscore the fact that "Veracel also owns and protects a reserve of over 6,000 hectares of primary forest." However, this area was simply there when the company arrived and the only thing that the company can be "proud and honored" about --as his letter says-- is that in that specific case the company did not violate the law! But Mr Prado also seems to forget that at the same time the company was destroying vast areas of mata atlantica forest to set up its plantations a few kilometres from that place. Additionally the presence of remnant forest in the "intersecting valleys" is much more connected to technical difficulties in entering with machinery to plant those areas than to environmental considerations.

Social impacts of Veracel in the region have also been negative. Like other big forestry companies operating in the region --Aracruz Celulose and Bahia Sul Celulose-- the company occupied vast areas of land for its plantations. Thus more and more small and medium rural landowners were

deprived of their lands, progressively invaded by plantations., while other economic alternatives disappeared. Only at the beginning of its operations the company received the support from local people, who saw it as possible job creator. But this support quickly disappeared, since the number of jobs created was smaller than promised, while the overall number of employment opportunities actually decreased in the region.

Mr Prado's letter shows that Veracel --whose major shareholders are now Stora Enso and Aracruz Celulose-- is quickly learning from its new partner Aracruz (see WRM bulletin 36) on how to disguise its impacts under a green discourse. But words cannot hide the facts for very long.

However, these companies don't use only words. They also use their power. Aracruz Celulose --with extensive eucalyptus plantations in the neighbouring state of Espirito Santo-- is now aiming at getting approval for a further expansion of its plantations in southern Bahia. Aracruz is famous for its long conflict with the Tupinikim and Guarani indigenous peoples in Espirito Santo, legitimate owners of the land that the company is occupying with vast eucalyptus plantations to feed its pulp mill. The company has requested the fast approval of the Environmental Impact Assessment for a further 45,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations in southern Bahia. Environmental NGOs have denounced that the process is completely biased in favour of Aracruz, which is using its influence to get the EIA approved. Aracruz has also strong links with the Governor of Bahia, who sees plantations with good eyes. Unless local organizations manage to influence the process, the EIA will probably become a mere formality and the states of Bahia and Espirito Santo will increasingly become --in the words of a Tupinikim indigenous leader-- a sea of "dead forests that kill everything."

Article based on information from: <http://www.snf.se/TRN/TaigaNews/News32/Tn32.pdf> ;
FASE/IBASE/Greenpeace.- Dossie Veracruz, Rio, December 1993; Sandra Faillace, FASE,
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