
Tree plantations: a false alternative to deforestation in Cameroon

A number of tree plantation programmes were implemented in Cameroon in the 1950s, when the territory was under French colonial rule, allegedly to address the process of destruction affecting the country's rich rainforests. As a result, about 40,000 hectares of plantations were set up in a period of 50 years, 25,000 of which in areas formerly occupied by dense rainforest, and the remaining 15,000 hectares in the savannah. Indigenous species --such as dibetou, okoume, ilomba and iroko-- were used to reforest woodlands, while in the savannah both native and exotic species --among which eucalyptus and acacia-- were used.

Although the stated aim of the authorities was to restore "the natural forest" in fact such plantations were not only not the solution, but have caused negative impacts.

The main reason for this failure is that a plantation of one or two single species --even native ones-- is not a forest, since it lacks its biodiversity and complexity. A forest is the product of a long coevolution process among its different components --including humans-- and the ecological conditions of the site. The recovery of a rainforest in tropical areas is a very difficult task with uncertain results, since the former conditions cannot be recreated artificially all of a sudden.

Afforestation with eucalyptus has made matters even worse. Eucalyptus planted by the National Bureau for Forest Regeneration --as if forests could be "regenerated" using eucalyptus!-- in the last two years caused soil acidification and a drastic drop in the fish population of the rivers nearby the plantation. They have increased the risk of fires in the savannah and are held responsible for the increase of severe floods.

Since in Cameroon the state claims property over all trees, plantations have provoked conflicts over land tenure between the government and local communities. Additionally, they have generated other problems, as in the case of the northern Sahel region, where local peasants complain that tree plots shelter crop-devastating bird and animals that have brought hunger and misery with them. It is feared that in case tree plantations are accepted as carbon sinks by the Convention on Climate Change, the ongoing projects will be reinforced and new ones will be implemented, thus increasing the level of negative impacts on people and the environment.

Halting the deforestation and forest degradation process in Cameroon requires to address and overcome the real causes of the problem, among which the depredatory activities of logging companies and the International Monetary Fund's imposed policies promoting the exploitation of timber to increase the country's export revenues (see WRM Bulletin 28). Tree plantations are not the solution --they are not forests- and will instead only add to the problem.

Article based on information from: "Tree Plantations in Cameroon: A Glance at the Possible Negative Impacts" by CED/FoE Cameroon, In: "Tree Trouble". A compilation of Testimonies on the Negative Impacts of Large-Scale Monoculture Tree Plantations prepared for the Sixth Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC. Friends of the Earth International-World Rainforest Movement-Fern.

