Costa Rica: The beneficial return of the forest

Together with the alarming destruction of primary forests in tropical South and Central America, in Costa Rica something positive is happening: an increase in the area of secondary forests, which are those that are starting to regenerate after having suffered a degradation process. These forests have a great potential for the production wood and non-wood products, as well as in the provision of environmental services.

A recently performed research has revealed that in Costa Rica secondary forests -comprising a total area of 425,000 hectares- constitute the most plentiful forest resource in the country. The conversion of woodlands into pasture lands to breed cattle was one of the main causes of deforestation in Costa Rica. The fall in the profitability of this activity and the consequent abandon of such destructive practice by cattle breeders has allowed vast areas of secondary forests to regrow. Additionally, the implementation of incentives for forest conservation, which started with the Forestry Law of 1996, and the inclusion of secondary forests into a programme of payment for environmental services have contributed to this process.

Costa Rican secondary forests bring economic benefits with them. The study proves that they are the home of different tree species which have acceptance in the domestic timber market. Likewise, this type of forest supplies a wide range of products, such as food, medicinal and ornamental plants, honey and textile fibres.

In spite of the above, the adequate management of this resource is still facing difficulties. On the one hand, even though legislation promotes natural regeneration in "forestry apt denuded soils", fragments of less than two hectares are excluded. Since these are the most numerous in the country, their elimination is therefore being promoted. At the same time, no funds are devoted for the sustainable management of secondary forests. On the other hand -and this is perhaps the most worrying issue- forestry "experts" that were interviewed during the research have a more positive view of gmelina monocultures than the one they have of secondary forests as a source of raw material for industry. The research also points out that the state has not been until now interested in the promotion of secondary forests and that this attitude needs to be modified.

From an environmental point of view, forests that have been cut down and that restart growing constitute efficient carbon sinks, apart from having several other environmental functions. The study mentions that secondary forests have a variable capacity to fix carbon, according to their growth rate and mean density of the wood present in the species that form them. Several other studies in Costa Rica reveal the importance of other environmental functions performed by secondary forests, such as the protection of water quality, the conservation of plant and animal biodiversity and the improvement of soil structure.

This study confirms the conclusions reached by a forum that took place last September in northern Costa Rica: that unlike plantations, secondary forests in that region constitute an interesting option for wood production and at the same time provide valuable environmental services (see WRM Bulletin 27)

Taking into account the multiple social and environmental benefits that secondary forests can supply, it is clear that one of the main strategies to be adopted in the region is to try to create the necessary conditions so that forests can occupy again the areas where they were eliminated to give place to other activities that proved to be unsustainable. Those interested in receiving the complete version of this work, please contact the International Secretariat of the WRM.

Article based on information from: Berti Lungo Carlo G., “Transformaciones recientes en la industria y la política forestal costarricense y sus implicaciones para el desarrollo de los bosques secundarios”, Tesis Magister Scientiae, Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza, Turrialba, Costa Rica, 1999.