
Brazil: joint government agency-Greenpeace action in the Amazon

The accelerated loss of the Amazon rainforest is perhaps the most notorious case of environmental destruction at a global level. It is not "humanity" as an abstract entity the one responsible for it. A research on forestry policy performed by the Brazilian National Security Agency (SAE) in 1998 concluded that 80% of the timber produced in the Amazon was extracted illegally. Powerful transnational companies were and are direct agents of this devastating activity (see WRM Bulletin 5). At the end of the chain, the demand in Europe and the United States for hardwoods, as well as the consumption by Brazilian urban elites for furniture, promote these large illegal logging operations.

Even if the Brazilian Environmental Agency (IBAMA) is committed to protect the Amazon, it does not count with the necessary means to accomplish its duties. At the same time, Brazilian domestic policy regarding natural resources -the Amazon included- differs very much from the one reflected in the nice speeches which the country representatives give in international fora. Unfortunately, it is the international market forces and the lobby of powerful rural and industrial interests which in fact dictate the government's behaviour on the issue. Nevertheless, every now and then small but significant victories are achieved.

This is the case of the recent joint action between IBAMA officials and Greenpeace activists in the Municipality of Icoaraci in the Northern State of Pará. Using a simple technology based on ultraviolet rays, in December 1999 Greenpeace volunteers were able to identify an illegal supply of logs of "faveira" in the yard of Eidai do Brasil, a Japanese export logging company operating in that region, which controls major plywood markets in the USA, Japan, UK and the Netherlands. Thus the IBAMA officials were able to fine the company and confiscate the logs.

The action had started a few days before, when IBAMA and Greenpeace personnel, returning from a routine visit to a mill in Pará State, stopped a truck carrying seven logs of "faveira", a type of timber used by the plywood industry. The cargo was not accompanied by Authorisation for Forest Products Transport documents, and was therefore illegal. In order to track the logs to their destination, the IBAMA agents released the truck after Greenpeace activists marked the logs with a special product which is sensitive to ultraviolet light. Once the Greenpeace activists were able to enter the Eidai facility, they identified the logs using UV lamps. During the same operation, IBAMA also apprehended and fined another logging truck delivering undocumented "faveira" timber to Eidai.

This is just a token of how much can be achieved by joint work in the defense of rainforests. At a larger scale, if governments together with environmental NGOs, indigenous peoples' organizations and concerned people join efforts to denounce and take direct steps to identify, control and punish depredators, a better future can be expected for the Amazon forest and its peoples.