
Colombia: save the "catival" forests

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. When big logging companies entered the region in the sixties, a period of social, cultural, economic and environmental devastation started.

These companies were interested in the vast extensions of the forests of "cativo" (*Prioria copaifera*) and "abarco" since both were economically attractive due to their high commercial yields. More than 30 years of exploitation have destroyed 85% of such forests, generating at the same time nothing but poverty and misery. Even when the Pacific Region represents less than 7% of the total forest coverage of the country, between 1987 and 1991 62.5% of the wood consumed in Colombia -some 4,749 million cubic metres- came from that region. In contrast, at the municipality of Riosucio, for example, the index of unsatisfied basic needs has jumped to 97.5%.

The Atrato River watershed, located in the Pacific Region, is part of the Choco biogeographic region. Due to its situation, geographic characteristics, geological processes and ecological evolution this area is unique. Together with the Amazon, the Choco presents the highest endemism levels in the Planet as well as an enormous biodiversity. This ecosystem is as rich as fragile. As a result of a process of centuries of coevolution with their environment, indigenous and black communities that inhabit the area have adequately adapted to this complex and fragile ecosystem, by combining agricultural and forestry systems with diverse options for the provision of incomes and food, such as hunting, fishing, agriculture and wood extraction.

A reductionist vision only aimed at the obtention of benefit as quickly as possible for a reduced group of entrepreneurs has seen the "catival" forest as a mere source of wood. Nevertheless it is much more than this, being a very specific and diverse system containing more than 60 plant species and performing important functions in relation to other ecosystems of the region. The factors leading to its nearly complete destruction have been: the exploitation by logging companies located at the lower Atrato by means of concessions and permits that have enabled them to establish a monopoly in the extraction, industrialization and trade of roundwood, ignoring completely the protection and regeneration of the forest; the increasing articulation of the economy of the region to the market economy, accompanied by more monocultures and extractivist practices; the indolence of the authorities with regard to the protection of natural resources and the improvement of life conditions of the population of the area; the view of the government which considers the region as a void land, ignoring that these territories have been occupied for centuries by indigenous and black communities, and stimulating the unplanned colonization by peasants that are pushed from the inner regions of the country, in search of better life conditions, and which have introduced unsustainable productive practices, such as slash-and-burn agriculture.

The granting of collective land titles to the traditional communities can be an alternative to halt and change the present state of things. More than two years ago, eight black communities of Riosucio

were the first to receive land titles from the Colombian state in the framework of Law 70. Nevertheless, nowadays it is very difficult that those communities -beset by poverty and by the menaces from armed bands at the service of the loggers- can guarantee not only the survival of the forest but even their own permanence in the region.

The deterioration of the "catival" forest is leading to desertification: the forest disappears, highly productive ecosystems as wetlands and forests are substituted by unproductive lands, local communities are forced to migrate and even the companies themselves are leaving once the resource is exhausted. It is urgent to initiate actions for the regeneration of the forest and to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of the local population and assure them their stay in the area. This is the only way to ensure the regrowth and survival of the catival forest.

Source: Gonzalo Diaz Canada, Fundacion Beteguma,