Costa Rica: secondary forests a better option than plantations

A forum took place in the northern region of Costa Rica on September 16-17 to reflect on and analyse the experiences regarding secondary forests and tree plantations developed in that region. Participants in the event included government officials, professional foresters, peasant organizations, forestry companies and environmental organizations. The Northern Region, which is affected by a severe process of deforestation is at the same time the area with more extensive tree monocultures (gmelina, teak, laurel and "terminalia") in the country. Such plantations have been subsidised at U$S 500 per hectare with public funds originated in a selective tax on the use of petrol. The total amount devoted to these subsidies has reached U$S 20 million in the last 10 years. A total of 40,000 hectares of plantations exist nowadays in Costa Rica.

The polemic issue of the environmental sustainability of the plantation model was discussed at the forum. The conclusion was that such model is inadequate. Most of plantations in the region are in a bad state or have completely failed because the adopted technolgy did not take into account the special conditions of the tropics. Additionally, most of the public funds were captured by big forestry companies and not by small peasants.

On the contrary it was made clear that the secondary forests are actually an interesting option for wood production. In that region there is a tradition in the use of the forests, that contain more than 150 species. Unlike monocultures, forests offer diverse environmental services, such as biodiversity conservation, capacity of acting as a biological corridor, soil and water protection, landscape and recreation.

The forum recommended that experiences based on native resources and including the use of indigenous and peasants' knowledge should be developed. Among them, the enriched secondary forest regeneration, mixed plantations with fast, medium and slow growing native species and agroforestry systems where small peasants play a central role. It was also demanded that local peasants' organizations have an effective access to public funding.

When discussions on forests go beyond the closed circle of professional foresters -educated in the concept of forests as mere wood producers- and open up to the participation of society, including environmental and social aspects, this is the kind of conclusions that naturally come out.

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