
Chile: the Treng Treng Mapuche and their struggle for land

The defense of the environment undertaken by the Mapuche indigenous communities in Arauco, Malleco and Cautin Provinces in southern Chile is something not explicit nor new for them. According to their cosmovision, natural elements and forces, together with human beings, are the components of the world or "mag mapu". This view is directly related to the struggle for the recovery of traditional indigenous territories, lost when the Chilean army seized them during the last century. Nowadays, these lands are in the hands of big and powerful forestry companies and vast extensions of radiata pine monocultures expand where the Mapuche ("the men of the land") used to live off the forest.

The community of Treng Treng at Carahue, in the IX Region, in 1996 confronted Forestal Mininco S.A., by taking the company to court for the possible depletion of water resources and their pollution by pesticides and chemicals used by the company, which planned to establish large scale tree plantations in a neighbouring estate. The decision of the court was contrary to the Mapuche because, according to the Chilean law, a judicial decision can only prevent "present acts or omissions". The precautionary principle is not applied. Nevertheless, the process was considered as a victory, since this Court admitted that the use of pesticides was detrimental to human health and additionally the Appeals Court of Temuco ordered that the operations for the plantation, as well as the application of pesticides should be suspended. The Mapuche, together with allied social organizations finally forced the company to abandon the project.

They then proceeded to claim to the Chilean State the devolution of their lands. Even if possible from a legal point of view, this is a very complicated and difficult process. Now the community of Treng Treng has been recognized the right to claim the land which can be purchased with money from the fund established in the Indigenous Peoples Law to be assigned in these cases. However, it will still take some time for the state to purchase from Mininco the 170 hectares they are claiming.

Forestal Mininco is opposing this demand. As every other forestry company in Chile, it has received for decades millions of dollars as direct and indirect subsidies from the State, to develop large scale tree plantations. Chilean forestry has been trumpeted as a model to be imitated by other countries. Nonetheless, it is clear that the "model" has not been good, not only for the indigenous peoples, but also for the environment or Chilean society as a whole. In effect, not only vast areas of forests have been destroyed in southern Chile to establish tree monocultures, but also during the last decade the Chilean economy entered an accelerated process of concentration of wealth in a few hands. The case we are presenting is paradigmatic. Mininco, which denies the Mapuche of Treng Treng of their right to get their 170 hectares back, is a subsidiary of Compania Manufacturera de Papeles y Cartones (CMPC) whose owner, Eliodoro Matte, has recently been included in Fortune Magazine's list of the 200 wealthiest people in the world. In 1993, CMPC owned 415,000 hectares of pine plantations in Chile and now probably owns a much larger area of land.

The Chilean state has always had money -and willingness- to subsidise this huge company, but seems to lack money -and willingness- to buy back 170 hectares to hand them back to the original owners. Something seems to be wrong somewhere.

Source: "Chile: el exito de los Mapuche de Treng Treng" by Ana Filippini to be published in Revista del Sur, July 1999.