
Paraguay: network created to monitor plantations

Given that both deforestation and the expansion of tree monocultures are negative processes affecting people and the environment in Paraguay, local NGOs are actively involved in the monitoring of such processes.

Paraguay has the highest deforestation rate in South America (2,4 % for the period 1981-1990) and one of the highest in Latin America. Clearcut and illegal exports of precious wood -especially by foreign logging companies- are the most important causes of this state of affairs. The promotion by the State of an export oriented model based on the production of soybean and cattle raising has been another relevant destructive factor regarding forests.

The conquest of political democracy in 1989 did not mean a real change to this tendency. Nevertheless, a wider space was created for the action of civil society organizations. Within that context, Paraguayan NGOs are currently addressing -together with the problem of deforestation and forest degradation- that of the expansion of large scale monoculture tree plantations. This "forestry development" model is not exclusive of Paraguay, but very similar to the one being applied in the Southern Cone of South America (Argentina, Chile, Southern Brazil and Uruguay) and having Chile as the model. However, the Paraguayan case has its own special features. Tree monoculture promotion in this country meets the demands of speculative or even fraudulent plans, associated with corruption, misinformation and fraud. At the same time, the implementation of tree monocultures is frequently linked to the destruction of native forests.

According to the 1994 Law 536 for the "promotion of reforestation", subsidies of up to 75% of the plantation costs are to be paid to forestry investors, but only a maximum of 10% of the area can be planted with native species to obtain such subsidies. This norm contributes to environmental degradation, since the chances for the regeneration of degraded forest ecosystems are dramatically reduced. Nevertheless, it is to be highlighted that the potential for this regeneration is still high due to the ecological and genetic viability that present natural forests still have in Paraguay. Civil society organizations, as well as academic circles insist on the need of regenerating and conserving those ecosystems.

On March 1999, Sobrevivencia/Friends of the Earth-Paraguay organized a meeting with government officials and NGO representatives that took place in Luque city. The objective of this workshop was to discuss about the issue of tree plantations, and the social and environmental impacts produced by them.

The workshop was preceeded by three tours carried out by members of Sobrevivencia to the Eastern Region of Paraguay. The southeastern area has been the most affected by tree monoculture expansion. Even if there is no official information on the area occupied by these plantations and on their composition, it has been estimated that it has reached 50,000 hectares, being eucalyptus the main species used. Pine and gmelina plantations were also detected. Two of the main companies involved in plantations -Forestal Paraná (subsidiary of Shell Paraguay) and PROFOR S.A.- have plans to plant 100,000 hectares in the next decade. Shell also owns vast plantations in Argentina,

Participants in the workshop stated that the objectives of the promotion of tree monocultures in Paraguay are in agreement with the interests of industrialized countries and big transnational corporations, as has already happened with the support given to large scale agriculture. It was made clear that plantations are feasible only due to high subsidies, attended with funding provided by the multilateral development banks. For instance, Shell's plantations are subsidised with funds provided by the World Bank. The UNDP (by means of the financial programme for the sustainable management of forests), the Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Change Convention, Northern cooperation agencies (NEDA, GTZ, Helvetas, JICA), as well as electricity generation companies, have been promoters of this kind of questioned forestry development.

The Workshop was not only limited to expressing criticism to the current situation, but also put forward alternatives aimed at the environmental and social reconstruction of the country. Some of the technical steps suggested were: the strict protection of the remaining native forest ecosystems, the enrichment of degraded and secondary forests, the research on the viability of these species when used in plantations and the set up of experimental mixed plantations using fast-growth native species. From the socioeconomic point of view, the workshop proposed the control by local and municipal multisectoral committees on illegal logging, a massive attack against rampant corruption at the official level, and the valuation of non-wood forest products and environmental services provided by forests.

Paraguayan civil society has historically been at the forefront of the defense of native forests, opposing the "development" model imposed on the country. In this case, the workshop decided to establish a tree plantation monitoring network. It is aimed to gather and share information on plantations, their expansion and impacts, by means of a data base. This network will also explore mechanisms and put forward proposals for the conservation of the remaining native forest ecosystems, will demand the inclusion of tree plantations within the agricultural sector, fight for the benefit of local communities regarding the utilization of forest resources, and promote scientific research on native forests as well as on the propagation of native species.

Even though the workshop considered that the present social, economic and political situation of instability that Paraguay is facing is not ideal for the development of activities requiring the involvement of civil society, participants agreed that this kind of innovative and participatory activities can have a positive impact to the benefit of forests, the environment and the people of Paraguay.

Sources: Ibarra, Jose and Nunez, Francisco, Un estudio de caso en las Serranias del Yvytyrusu, Paraguay, Proceso causas subyacentes de la deforestacion y la degradacion de los bosques, Asuncion, octubre de 1998; "Cualquier árbol es un buen árbol?", Final report of a project of Sobrevivencia/Friends of the Earth-Paraguay, 1999.