
The need to raise awareness on the true character of tree plantations

One of the main reasons which explains why large-scale industrial tree plantations can be promoted at the global level while they are being strongly opposed at the local level, is the manipulation of concepts and information to feed the uninformed public. Trees -any trees- are presented as synonymous to forests and forests are rightly perceived by most people as good and necessary to humanity. The fact that plantations have nothing in common with forests is not that easy to be understood by the general -particularly the urban- public.

On the contrary, local people can easily see the difference. Shortly after large-scale tree monocrops are planted, they begin to perceive -and suffer- that difference. Wildlife begins to become scarce in the area and almost inexistent within the boundaries of the plantations. Changes in the hydrologic cycle leads to water scarcity and in some cases also to over-flooding after heavy rains. Useful plants disappear. Water courses are damaged through increased siltation due to soil erosion originating in the plantations. Plantation management results in chemical pollution due to the widespread use of agrochemicals. Such changes have strong implications for local peoples' livelihoods. Wild animals, fish, mushrooms, fruit, honey, vegetables, form an important part of their diet. Water security is basic for their agricultural and animal husbandry activities. The forest provides fodder, firewood, medicines, wood for housing, grasses for thatching, fibres and many other products and services. Plantations do not provide any of those and, to make matters worse, deprive people from most of the available agricultural land, which is taken over by one large company.

However, plantations are being promoted throughout the world as "planted forests". As if a forest, in its complexity of interactions involving people, energy, climate, soil, water and biodiversity, could be planted. Sooner or later, people begin to perceive that plantations are not "forests" and plantation companies then resort to a different set of arguments, trying to convince people that plantations are good, even accepting they are not forests. One of the more widely used arguments is that which states that "plantations help to alleviate pressure on native forests", by providing goods that would otherwise be obtained from forests. This argument sounds appealing, particularly to the increasing number of people concerned about deforestation. . . only that it is not true.

All plantations in tropical countries have directly or indirectly resulted in increased destruction of native forests. Most plantation companies clear the existing forest to make way for their tree crops. On the other hand, fast-growth tree monocrops are mostly oriented to the pulp industry and therefore do not alleviate any pressure from the logging of tropical timber for the sawnwood and plywood industry. Additionally, many pulp and paper companies which implement plantations to feed their pulpmills also use wood from tropical forests, either prior to the moment when the plantations mature or simultaneously use wood from the forest and from plantations (see for instance article on Venezuela in this bulletin).

As each argument falls apart, the companies' hired "experts" invent another one, trying to make this unsustainable forestry model acceptable by different audiences. For example, that plantations create employment. The fact that plantations destroy more jobs than the ones they create and that the quality of employment they provide is dismal seems to be irrelevant to such "experts". Or that

plantations are necessary to supply an increasing demand for paper in an increasingly literate world. This hides the fact that some 40% of the paper produced ends in packaging and wrapping, as well as the fact that pulp-exporting Southern countries with extensive plantations (such as Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa or Chile) consume 10 times less paper than industrial countries.

The inventive of these “experts” to prove the impossible seems to be inexhaustible. The truth is that plantations are simply tree crops aimed at ensuring the future supply of the pulp and paper industry once its traditional resource base -native forests- becomes depleted. As with any other industry, its purpose is to produce, and sell, and make a profit. The difference is that this industry -which is in fact one of the most destructive and polluting in the world- tries to portray its tree plantations, as a “greening the earth” operation. Trees are green . . . and so is the American dollar, which is the only colour they are interested in.