
Forest reclamation in Iceland

Alvaro Gonzalez, from the WRM secretariat, participated in an International Workshop that took place in Reykjavik and Klaustur, Iceland last September. Even though forests were not the central theme of the workshop, it was a good opportunity to get to know in situ the harmful effects of woodland destruction and overgrazing in the fragile icelandic ecosystems. According to studies performed on remnants of former vegetation, traditional Sagas, historical records and farm surveys, birch (*Betula pubescens*) may have covered 25% to 40% of the country before human settlement that started in 874 A.D. Willows (*Salix* spp.) and other dwarf shrubs also dominated the vegetation in large areas. Most forests were felled for timber and woodlands were cleared for agriculture and grazing. These actions, added to the harsh climate, volcanic activity and a vulnerable soil formation, led to a desertification process affecting 40% of the total area of the country, according to the national environmental assessment carried out this year. Concerned Icelandic people and authorities are making efforts to reverse this chain of events, aiming at the reconstruction of the original grasslands and woodlands.

Sources: Andres Arnalds. "Ecosystem Disturbance in Iceland", 1987. The Icelandic Forestry Association. "Why plant trees in Iceland?".