
Fires, forests and peoples: knowledge and practices under threat

Forest peoples' knowledge and practices of the use and management of controlled fire in forests have been identified within climate change policies as the cause of forest fires. Nevertheless, fire is critical for ensuring the food and cultural sovereignty of forest peoples.

When we think of the word "fire" we usually imagine something harmful, dangerous and even polluting. Nevertheless, while some fires can be highly destructive, **fire can also be a great ally for forest peoples.** In fact, fire is and has been a living element present in the various forests of the world since time immemorial, ignited as much by "nature" (through lightning, plants that spontaneously combust or intense droughts) as well as by human beings. Indigenous peoples and peasants use controlled fires in many parts of the world for various purposes, historically helping to enrich the diversity of habitats and the environments they inhabit. **Shifting or migratory agriculture, which establishes adequate cycles, spaces and times for fire management, is a crucial practice that ensures food sovereignty.**

Ironically, this knowledge and these ancestral practices of use and management of fire in relation to forests, are the same ones that are being **identified by the main policies on climate change as the cause of deforestation and forest fires.**

Blaming itinerant or migratory agriculture for deforestation is nothing new. In recent decades, governments of countries that contain tropical forests – and in following the "advice" and donations/loans received from multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and others - have labeled itinerant agriculture as an "inefficient," "primitive" and "forest-destroying" practice. Such governments have **promoted or forced the transformation of itinerant agricultural lands into more intensive activities** (such as agribusiness, logging or the spread of monoculture tree plantations for industry).

The forest peoples who use itinerant agriculture have been persecuted, displaced and criminalized. Meanwhile, the mega industries that have imposed themselves on forests and their inhabitants, burning thousands and even millions of hectares to open up the land to commercial activities, which, for the most part,

simply intensifies and facilitates forest fires, are completely unrestricted. Quite the opposite in fact. As an article in this bulletin reveals, **the fire regime of capitalism is underpinned by the combustion burning away in the thousands of factories, extraction points and existing combustion engines**, viewed not only as perfectly legal interventions but also a supposed model to follow.

Another article in this bulletin also tells **the story of the indigenous Delang people in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia**. This is a region plagued by palm oil plantations, and where a violent prohibition has been imposed on itinerant agriculture, which has been blamed for the fires that have scorched the country. Local people have thus been left with no alternatives for their sustenance. While large-scale fires have increased in Indonesia over the last decade, the article highlights how **80% of the forests in Central Kalimantan have been converted to palm oil plantations, and most of the forest fires occurred in these allocated locations**. While the palm oil firms remain unpunished in the face of their clear role in deforestation and fires, the Delang people continue to suffer the violent consequences.

So, if governments have been already banning itinerant agriculture, what then has changed? Climate change, large-scale deforestation and their consequences continue to increase. The actors behind climate change policies are once again hiding the root causes of this problem. Taking advantage of media hype about forest fires, prohibitions against "indigenous burning" and the use of itinerant agriculture are being promoted even more robustly.

Almost all programs and projects on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), for example, identify itinerant agriculture as a threat to forests. Consequently, they severely limit or simply prohibit such practices, while to exercise these limits and prohibitions they frequently count on the support of armed guards. However, the real causes of large-scale deforestation, such as industrial logging, mega infrastructure projects, mining, huge hydroelectric dams, large industrial tree, oil palm and soybeans plantations, along with industrial-scale animal breeding sites and other such interventions, take place without any limits or prohibitions.

Starting with the question **Who is really burning the Amazon?** we present an article that delves deeply into the causes behind the fires threatening these tropical forests.

Another article provides **a detailed explanation of what's happening in Chile, where the monoculture tree plantations of the pulp and paper industry** have been the scene of raging forest fires that have blighted the ancestral territories of the indigenous Mapuche and the lands of small farmers. The author reminds us of the **immense power wielded by such corporations**, not only to destroy the environment for their own benefit and with no legal consequence, but also of their collusion with government agencies to prevent judicial investigations, while simultaneously orchestrating media campaigns to criminalize the Mapuche.

Then there's **the case of Quito, Ecuador**, which for different reasons is also emblematic. A "green belt" surrounding the capital is nothing less than a plantation of eucalyptus trees. **Lacking the diversity afforded by native trees, replaced by a monoculture of highly flammable exotic species, the evermore intense fires that threaten the city during each dry season have basically been facilitated.**

Another article recapitulates **a resistance struggle that took place in the late 80's in Portugal's Lila Valley**. Local people tore down the eucalyptus plantations from their land, and prevented the planting of new eucalyptus monocultures, a stance they have maintained right up to the present. Despite the voracious fires that plague the forests and fields of that country every year, this particular zone has never burned.

And finally we include in this bulletin **the struggle of the indigenous Shawi people** who inhabit the Peruvian Amazon. This time the threat to the environment that sustains them comes in the form of **the world's largest gold mining multinational: the Barrick Gold Corporation**.

We conclude this editorial with an anonymous poem from Africa taken from the book "Memories of Fire I" by the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano, who reminds us how beautiful and powerful fire is, and what it means for communities the world over. Enjoy!

Bantu People's Song of the Fire

Fire gazed on by people in the night,

in the deep night.

Fire you blaze without burning, you glow without blazing.

Fire you fly without a body.

Fire you have no heart, you know not a home or hut.

Transparent fire of palm trees:

a man calls on you unafraid.

Fire of sorcerers, your father, where is he?

Your mother, where is she?

Who has fed you?

You are father, you are mother.

You pass by but leave no trace.

Dry wood does not spawn you,

You have not ashes as daughters.

You die yet die you not.

*Wondering souls transform into you, but no one
is aware.*

Fire of sorcerers,

Spirit of the waters below and the air above.

Fire that glows, firefly that lights up the marshlands.

Bird without wings, object without body,

Spirit of the Power of Fire.

Listen to my voice:

a man calls on you

unafraid.

Eduardo Galeano

Memory of Fire (I. Genesis)