
Brazil: Plantation Company Suzano Covers Up its Devastating Impacts with Claims of “Conservation”

A key tactic for the giant pulp producer, Suzano S.A, to keep expanding its industrial eucalyptus plantations in Brazil, is to market itself as a company that practices “conservation” and “restoration.” This conceals its disastrous track record related to forest and forest-dwelling populations.

The Atlantic Forest (or Mata Atlântica), one of the most biodiverse biomes, once stretched along the coastline of Brazil. Also covering parts of Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina, it coexisted with indigenous and other traditional communities for generations. Today, it survives mostly in small patches and Protected Areas, which are largely managed by private companies. (1) The so-called central corridor of the Atlantic Forest is located in Brazil’s south-eastern states of Bahia and Espírito Santo.

These states also house hundreds of thousands of hectares of eucalyptus tree plantations, mostly owned by pulp and paper company Suzano S.A. In 2019, Suzano Papel e Celulose S.A. and Fibria Celulose merged to form the world’s largest short-fibre eucalyptus pulp producer, Suzano S.A. The company owns pulp mills, paper mills and energy plants, all located in Brazil. It also owns the biotechnology company, Futura Gene, which was the first company to obtain a permit to commercially release one type of Genetically Engineered (GE) Eucalyptus tree in Brazil. This scale of production has resulted into over one million hectares of eucalyptus tree plantations, and represents a major threat to the remaining Atlantic Forest.

A key tactic that pulp and paper companies use to keep expanding their plantations and business, is to market themselves as “green” companies. Suzano claims to be “a global reference in sustainable use of natural resources.” (2) The company also states that the conservation and restoration areas it has created “are interspersed with eucalyptus plantations in order to produce forests mosaics that help maintain balance of the ecosystem.” As a result, it claims that its Restoration Program, which began in 2009, “promotes sustainability through the restoration of natural capital and its inherent ecosystem services.” (3)

The company uses these statements to greenwash its operations, thereby legitimizing its expansion and positioning itself as “part of the solution” instead of the problem. For Suzano, forests are natural capital that could lead to more profits for the company. Unsurprisingly, Suzano also has partnerships with conservationists NGOs like WWF, The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International (4). Yet, it is clear that the company’s propaganda aims to undermine the well-documented and very serious impacts that both Fibria and Suzano, - and now Suzano S.A - continue to cause to forests and life spaces where local communities depend on. (5)

It should also be noted that most of the areas set aside for conservation within the companies’ concessions are, in fact, mandated under Brazilian law, which demands that 20 per cent of all rural properties inside the area of the biome Atlantic Forest be maintained as legal reserve areas. Besides, the funds that these companies spend on Protected Areas or conservation activities can come or go away according to the company’s terms. News portal Mongabay reported how when Suzano was

renewing its licence on more than 22,000 hectares of eucalyptus in the area around the Protected Areas of Córrego Grande and Rio Preto, it did as many small properties instead of just one big undertaking to avoid paying any “environmental compensation”, which is the money companies have to pay to Protected Areas whenever they engage in initiatives with high environmental impact. (6) And although Suzano claims that it is “protecting” more than the Brazilian law mandates, these “green” patches are highly fragmented and surrounded by monocultures. And the more fragmented a forest is, the more threatened and therefore the more susceptible to fires it becomes.

Another important issue to highlight is Suzano’s trading of Green Bonds on the stock market to raise money to invest in these “conservation” activities. Suzano is the largest Brazilian issuer of Green Bonds. According to the company, the millions of dollars raised were invested in “projects that generate environmental and financial gains at our forest and industrial operations” (emphasis added). (7)

In this context, WRM talked with Ivonete Gonçalves, a long-time researcher and activist from Brazil, in order to reflect on Suzano’s conservation activities. Due to space constraints, this is a summary of her answers, but [you can access the full answers in Portuguese here](#).

WRM: Based on your experience, why do you think the Suzano company is so “concerned about” conservation and biodiversity?

Ivonete: Pulp and paper companies always makes statements that don’t line up with reality. I have seen this for almost thirty years. The historical movement shows that this strategy comes from the capitalist mode of production, so it is not new. They always acted with information that was disconnected from reality. They are experts in concealment. It is an illusion when the company is applauded for claiming that it “has more forests than plantations.” This illusion has been invented with the clear goal of creating a favorable climate for the company, during times of deep reflection about the replacement of native forests with plantations and the consequences this has for humanity.

Suzano needs to indicate which audience it is speaking to. Surely it is talking to its partners and board of directors, because the people in the region already know how [these companies] act, since they have been here for a long time. For a company of that size, it is not possible to be concerned about conservation or biodiversity. One only need look at their track record—of the expansion of their plantations causing deforestation—for this discourse to be discredited.

And today, with so many genetic modifications, we do not know exactly what species [of eucalyptus] is there. And the destruction continues. It is enough to see, for example, how much groundwater is absorbed daily by each tree; and there are about 1,500 trees per hectare on a total of more than one million hectares of eucalyptus trees. In addition, about 80 cubic meters of water are supplied per minute to each of the two plants in the region. And we have to take into account the various poisons with different uses and modalities, which are spread manually or by plane—relentlessly applied at each stage of production. We must also highlight the impoverishment of the soil, since “All life on our planet depends on a living soil: the water in rivers and wells, vegetation, human health, food and even the climate. The erosion, floods and desertification that are so frequent today are a result of dead soils” (8). And on top of all the ills caused by companies like Suzano, rural communities—oppressed by eucalyptus plantations—are unable to grow healthy food because they are periodically bathed in poisons from the commodity plantations. Trees used for paper feed relentlessly on poisons.

Thus, concepts such as “conservation” or “biodiversity” were distorted to the point of not being

recognized by those who live in the area, or by any sensible person who is deeply familiar with the region.

WRM: In your opinion, how can a company whose business was and continues to be a direct cause of large-scale deforestation so calmly claim to be a “leader in sustainability”?

Ivonete: The development of concepts to manipulate an ideology of sustainability only exists within the discourse of the companies and their allies. And these concepts try to make the cruelty of the operations of companies like Suzano more agreeable to specific audiences. This cruelty appears in different moments, beginning with the destruction of the Atlantic Forest—one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet!

And since this is an opinion, I am going to share some reflections that I believe are relevant to this moment in history. Faced with the major world crisis due to the Covid-19 virus, I think it is important to reflect and seek new directions. I am here as a traveler in this time, seeing this past-present of land expropriation, of a reality of environmental injustice, where I also live and experience the dire consequences of the Suzano and Stora Enso project. I take advantage of the forced retreat caused by nature to think and dream globally with local awareness, without trying to exhaust the issue or establish it as the only truth. But this is something that I think is healthy for the South and the North; because the global situation brought on by Covid-19 affirms that we are all vulnerable, and that the capitalist economy does not “save” anybody. In that way, nature has taught me, during my years of research and experience with eucalyptus and other monoculture plantations, that “pests” do not exist. What exists is imbalance. As we swap diversity for (mono)cultures around the world, with a whole bundle of synthetic inputs, we are throwing the global ecosystem out of balance; and pathogens are transforming. They are getting stronger and attacking plants and animals, and even humans. In contrast, I have seen through experience that with Agroecology projects, all beings integrate naturally without causing harm; and the ecosystem is in balance and gives life—abundant life—for all beings.

A society based on monocultures is exclusive and promotes acute social inequality—which leads to the impossibility of covering basic needs like food and water for most people. Let us therefore include a space to share global experiences, to foster hope among minority groups—both in the countryside and the city. I think the time has come for companies like Suzano, Stora Enso and others—with their long track records of expropriation of nature and people—to return the focus to those who have rights: peoples and territories.

WRM: What is Suzano’s strategy? What does “conservation” mean to this company?

Ivonete: Suzano claims that almost 40% of its areas are used for conservation.

However, it is easy to show that this information is false. To prove it, it is enough to go around the numerous tree plantations (understood here as commodity plantations) lining the roads and communities, and see how much Atlantic Forest is visible; or one can do this with geoprocessing images. Even considering the three Conservation National Parks of the Atlantic Forest, the percentage that the company publicizes is not reached. Together, the three parks do not total 100,000 hectares. The Pau Brasil National Park is 19,000 hectares, the Monte Pascoal National Park is 22,383 hectares, and the Discovery National Park is 21,213 hectares. That is, together they add up to 62,596 hectares of native forest. Meanwhile, in the same region where the Parks are located, in the southernmost part of [the state of] Bahia, Suzano and Stora Enso have more than one million hectares of eucalyptus trees.

Suzano and Stora Enso's invasion of a large part of the territory causes conflicts; and the conflicts are at the root of the establishment of the tree plantation complex in this region. There are countless conflicts stemming from land disputes, involving indigenous and quilombola communities and small-scale landless farmers. There is a strong lobby to repress any initiative to seek rights. Repression is carried out via State apparatus such as the police and the courts of justice. Any initiative by the communities to defend their territories is repressed, and the leaders are persecuted. Today, the extreme right-wing policy installed in the country reinforces this strategy.

WRM: Did the communities' situation improve with the company's conservation programs?

Ivonete: Those strongly impacted have not seen any improvement; neither has any observant visitor. In these times of crisis, the situation is even more tense. The few public policies oriented toward the population impacted by the eucalyptus plantation project have been totally destroyed. Small farmers no longer have institutional support or reinforcement.

What mitigates the problem are the initiatives generated by movements of rural landless workers—mainly the MST (Landless Workers Movement), which has various settlements and has been working tirelessly to produce food. Healthy, agroecological food without toxins. The MST also has a national plan to recover degraded areas, and in Bahia the goal is to plant a million plants of different varieties, using the agroecological system.

- (1) Mongabay, [Brazilian state invites private companies to run Atlantic Forest parks](#), 2016
- (2) Suzano, [About Us](#)
- (3) UN SDG Partnership, [How Suzano's Restoration Program transforms degraded, pastureland into regenerative, native Brazilian vegetation](#)
- (4) Suzano Papel e Celulose, [Green Bonds Annual Report](#), 2017
- (5) See information on [Fibria's impacts here](#) and [Suzano's impacts here](#).
- (6) Mongabay, [In Brazil's Atlantic Forest, conservation efforts drown in a sea of eucalyptus](#), 2017
- (7) Idem (4)
- (8) PRIMAVESI, Ana. MANUAL DO SOLO VIVO. 2016. 2nd revised edition. Expressão Popular. San Pablo. 2016