
Chile: Resistance to the forestry model in Wallmapu, Mapuche territory

For decades, Mapuche communities have been resisting the impacts of the forestry model that a handful of companies, in collusion with governments, have imposed in Chile. This industry, based on large-scale monoculture plantations, has caused land invasions, forest destruction, environmental contamination, social disintegration and poverty. Against this backdrop, communities are organizing to recover lands and develop their ways of life in accordance with the culture and worldview of the Mapuche People.

To deepen our understanding of this struggle, we share excerpts from an interview with Pablo Reyes Huenchumán, a *werkén* (spokesperson) from the Paillakawe Lov (a Mapuche community). The interview was originally published [on the platform Undisciplined Environments](#), in the framework of the International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations in September 2023. The *Paillakawe Lov* is in a process of territorial recovery in the Gulf of Arauco, in the Biobío region of Chile, which is part of Wallmapu (Mapuche ancestral territory).

What are the main impacts in your territory of the forestry model based on large-scale plantations?

The impacts have been going on for more than 50 years. This model was established during the Pinochet dictatorship, when the take-over of Mapuche territory in this area intensified. The plantation industry, and specifically the Arauco company of the Angelini Group, acquired large swaths of territory at the expense of the people, with the help of friends and families of the dictatorship. For example, one key person in this sector was [Julio Ponce](#), Pinochet's son-in-law, who enabled the transfer of many lands to the National Forestry Corporation where he worked (CONAF, by its Spanish acronym). He ended up selling these lands at ridiculously low prices, and they ended up in the hands of the Angelini Group. Currently, Arauco has almost two million hectares in its name.

This is how this model became established, with the displacement of peasants and Mapuche people. There are stories from our family, from our *lov* (Mapuche community), stories from people who still remember how their houses were burned, and how they were threatened by forest rangers who told them that they had to leave because this was forestry sector land. Many agricultural lands were converted to plantations, which degraded the soil. Since then, the plantation industry has had a huge impact, with social, environmental, political and territorial effects.

What factors contribute to the perpetuation of this forestry model?

Plantation companies, and capital, in general, are in a constant state of restructuring and greenwashing their image. On the one hand, they rely on tools like the FSC certification (Forest Stewardship Council)—which allow them to sell their product at a higher price—all while saying that they work in an orderly and environmental fashion, without conflicts with surrounding communities. That is a lie.

The plantation company now wants to bring wind energy here. In 2019, Arauco plantation company unveiled the M.A.P.A. Project, which seeks to expand the pulp mill that is already located in the Gulf of Arauco. In conjunction with this, a wind farm project called [Viento Sur](#) was planned. In April 2022, we were invited to the indigenous and citizen consultation process. We wanted to tell them that one of the towers for this wind energy project is planned to be built over a Rewe (Mapuche sacred altar). Just like there are churches and mosques in the wingka (non-Mapuche) world, we practice our spirituality through the Rewe. What this project is proposing is very violent; for us, it is inconceivable to let this happen. And even though we gave them all the information, none of our arguments were taken into account.

Furthermore, private capital is using communities that we call *yanakona* (Mapuche communities that betray their people). These are communities that are aligned with capital interests, communities that have negotiated, for example, for the expansion of the M.A.P.A. Project. The companies offer economic compensation to the communities, but so far we have not seen a single community get out of poverty with the crumbs that the company gives them. But this appears to be a strategy: these communities are bought through their leaders. This is how the Mapuche social fabric gets taken apart.

And this is not only happening in Chile, but all throughout Latin America. Latin American capitalism is mediocre; it is always content to sell its raw materials as quickly as possible. It does not seek to generate investment so that the people can also become owners of that resource. So, the State continues to be mediocre with its own people, creating development policies through the use of these large companies as “problem solvers.” For example, there is an idea that the plantation company should be the one to solve the unemployment problem. So, the State provides spaces for the company to inaugurate cultural centers and sports centers. In this way, the State allows and encourages the company to insert itself into the social fabric. Through the use of propaganda and the media, they have gained all this space.

How do you organize to face the impacts of this model and gain sovereignty?

As Mapuche People, we organize through the *Trawun*, which are community assemblies. In the *Trawun*, we decide what actions to take. It was in a *Trawun* that we agreed to pursue the process of territorial control, which involves occupying lands; we call them lands in recovery. This involves keeping the plantation company away, even if there is a possibility for persecution, imprisonment or even death. Currently, the *Paillakawe Lov* controls about a thousand hectares; when we take into account the territory controlled by other *lovs* and neighboring communities in the Gulf of Arauco, this is an additional 7,000 to 8,000 hectares. For the last three years, the plantation company has not been able to enter the territories that we currently control, except for in a confrontation that took place in the *Vilo Lov* in the Huape sector; that was an action carried out by the militarized police trying to enter the recovered territory with small tanks.

These land recovery processes have been going on for more than 20 years in other territories further south in the province of Arauco. The Council of All Lands, and especially the Arauco Malleco Coordinating Committee, have framed these as territorial control processes. Territorial control involves staying in the territory, making a life and exercising sovereignty in the space. And that is what we are doing: growing potatoes, peas and beans; raising chickens and pigs. But there are consequences: the plantation company is using criminal measures against us for having entered a piece of land and remained there; they are targeting the leaders in particular with criminal charges of usurpation. We also suffer other forms of harassment, through drones, helicopters, persecution and even shootings by rangers. Everyone who participates in territorial recovery processes knows that we

expose ourselves to this.

What are the main challenges in this struggle?

Militarization is a challenge, even with this government under (Gabriel) Boric. We fear that Wallmapu will be [militarized](#) for the four years of his administration. The Gulf of Arauco is not mentioned much in the press—although when we took to the streets, we were called violent, terrorists, or, more recently, drug traffickers. Here, the only violence is exercised by companies and forest rangers. Another challenge we have is dealing with the company's strategies that cause divisions and co-opt leaders. And also, colonialism is still very present.

What are concrete measures that the State and other institutions could take to prioritize the people's right to decide?

In *Paillakawe Lov*, we consider that the only measure that would really be effective would be for the Chilean State to expropriate lands from these large plantation companies. Even though there are mechanisms to restitute lands through CONADI (National Corporation for Indigenous Development), they are obsolete. Recent governments have raised the quota for land purchases, but the reality is that less and less land is being purchased, because the legal owners of these lands are raising their prices. So, the restituted lands can be as small as three hectares. The Mapuche People have always criticized this form of managing territory, because it is ridiculous: the *lov* is a form of community life, it is how we develop as families and as a people in the territory; the *lov* are big spaces. A *lov* is never going to be developed on three hectares, but in a territory with physical, natural and spiritual elements—which the Mapuche need for fulfillment. So, this form of restituting land in recent years is not something that we value as Mapuche. The most revolutionary thing would be for the State to expropriate forestry lands from large landowners, for community management.

Here is another measure that should be taken: consultations related to the ILO [Convention 169](#) (International Labor Organization) on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples should be binding—not only as it relates to Mapuche People but to all Indigenous Peoples.

How do you imagine or dream of a future with territorial sovereignty?

Most of the territory currently controlled by the *Paillakawe Lov* is high-elevation land, hills, and coastal mountains. There are about 200 hectares of native forest, which are rich in biodiversity, but the rest is — or was — tree monoculture. Despite being a mountainous space, in certain areas it is possible to develop subsistence or family agriculture in the *lov*, and *Trafkintu* (exchange) of products, as the Mapuche people did before the European invasion, and even before the Inkan invasion, with small-scale agricultural production of corn and different kinds of vegetables, favas and beans. So, we dream of having family-based and local agriculture, with products from the area produced without the use of agrochemicals. This can give us stability, so that we can watch our families grow without going hungry or being slaves to large landowners. And we can also contribute to the rest of the population; as Mapuche people we can contribute wheat and potatoes to soup kitchens. This is what we propose: a return to food sovereignty — both for ourselves and for the population as a whole, between peoples.

In the areas where it is very difficult to restore organic farming, monoculture would be acceptable. Not on the level of the plantation company here in the area, but on a very small scale — one or two hectares. This would be for the production of firewood for cooking, and for the construction of smaller wooden structures and improvements to the *ruka* (house). In this way, we could avoid felling native

trees for these purposes, and also leave areas of native forest untouched — spaces where the *Ñuke Mapu* (Mother earth) has her own space, and spaces where we can practice our spirituality, for the Trawun celebration, for *Ngillatun* (Mapuche ceremony), and for *Palín* (a game that strengthens alliances between different *lov*). This is what we want to rebuild.

Marien González-Hidalgo

Research associate at the Rural Development Division of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU).