
The high cost of excessive paper consumption

An analysis of environmental destruction processes usually leads to the identification of a series of causes, which can be classified as either direct or underlying causes. For example, one of the direct causes of the destruction of forests is their conversion to monoculture plantations of soybeans (Brazil, Paraguay), oil palm trees (Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Colombia), pine trees (Chile) or eucalyptus trees (Brazil, Ecuador). Yet behind this easily identifiable cause there are others – the underlying causes – that ultimately determined and enabled this conversion.

There may be a number of underlying causes, which can also be interrelated: the building of highways that gave the companies involved access to the forests; the loans from multilateral financial institutions that made it possible to build these highways; the pressure exerted by the International Monetary Fund to increase exports to pay off external debts; the assistance provided by the FAO and other “cooperation” agencies to promote these monocultures; and the promotion of agrofuels by the European Union, among others.

But almost all environmental destruction processes share a common underlying cause: excessive consumption. There are countless examples of this fact. The social and environmental destruction caused by industries like oil, mining, logging and shrimp farming have been amply documented. While the products of these industries are consumed in many countries, the bulk of consumption is concentrated in a small number of them: the United States, Japan and the member states of the European Union, to name the most obvious ones. This consumption thus constitutes the common underlying cause of the destruction of the lands and livelihoods of a great many communities around the world.

In the case of paper and paperboard, worldwide consumption has already long surpassed the threshold of sustainability. Nevertheless, the industry that benefits from this consumption plans to increase it even further. Contrary to the paper companies’ advertising claims, this rise in consumption is not aimed at satisfying people’s real paper needs, but rather at increasing the use of paper and paperboard packaging, which accounts for over 50% of total production. Therefore, this increase will not involve printing more books or textbooks, but rather the invention of new “needs” for disposable products (such as paper cups, tablecloths and napkins), which will be used only once before they are added to the mountains of garbage in the wealthy countries.

This level of paper and paperboard consumption requires a steady supply of vast quantities of abundant, homogenous and cheap raw material. This is why the paper industry initially turned to a seemingly inexhaustible source of raw material: the forests of Europe, Japan, the United States and Canada. In time, however, this source of raw material began to run out, due to excessive consumption. The industry then turned to the establishment of huge monoculture plantations of fast-growing trees (eucalyptus, acacia, pine), which resulted in the destruction of forests and grasslands in countries of the South (and even in some regions in the North). These plantations, which continue to expand, are now becoming the main source of raw material for paper production. More recently, the industry has also begun to move pulp production to the South – close to the tree plantations – to supply its paper plants located near the main markets: the high-consumption North.

Moving pulp production to the South is aimed at several objectives. The first is lower costs, thanks to access to cheap land (where the trees also grow ten times faster than in the North), cheap labour, state support, and lax environmental controls. The second objective, linked to the first, is increased production of cheap pulp in order to create new paper consumption “needs”. Achieving these two objectives makes it possible to achieve the industry’s third and most important objective: increased profits.

Nevertheless, these economically “cheap” costs for the industry are extremely costly in social and environmental terms for those who suffer the consequences. This is why numerous local communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America are fighting back against the spread of monoculture tree plantations and pulp mills, working in coordination with organizations and processes in the North. To contribute to these efforts, we are including a special section on the subject of paper consumption in this edition of the WRM bulletin. We hope it will be useful for everyone – in both the South and the North – who is involved in this struggle.