
International Day Against Monoculture Tree Plantations

In 2004, the Brazilian Network campaigning against the spread of tree plantations came up with the idea of instituting an International Day Against Monoculture Tree Plantations on 21 September, which is National Tree Day in that country. The idea was supported by organizations from all over the world, who since then carry out a number of special activities on this day.

It is important to stress that this is certainly not a day aimed at opposing tree planting in general, but an activity focusing on one type of plantation in particular: large scale tree monocultures.

The need for such opposition is increasingly clear. While governments and many international institutions continue promoting what they term as “forest plantations” or “planted forests”, local communities continue to oppose what they describe as “green deserts”, “green cancer”, “selfish trees”, “planted soldiers”, or “dead forests”.

Such differences in wording reflect the gap between those who promote these plantations as something positive –forests- and those who oppose them because of their negative social and environmental impacts, described under the above terms.

Knowledge gained during the past decades, of the fact that plantations are established at the expense of local peoples’ livelihoods and environment, has now reached such a level of certainty that it can no longer be ignored. In country after country, monoculture tree plantations have resulted in net loss of employment, forced or “voluntary” evictions, appropriation of large areas of land by national and transnational corporations, depletion and pollution of water resources, biodiversity loss, soil impoverishment, destruction of local ecosystems –forests or grasslands- and in many cases in human rights abuses including repression, imprisonment and even death.

Increasing consumer awareness on the impacts of the production of wood-related products –ranging from paper to furniture- led to the creation of certification systems, whereby consumers would be able to receive assurances that their purchases were not resulting in impacts on forests and forest-dependent peoples.

Those certification systems were promoted by different national, regional and international actors and led to the creation of a number of labels: Canadian Standards Association Standard (CSA), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes (PEFC), Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), The Australian Forestry Standard (AFS), Sistema Brasileiro de Certificação Florestal (CERFLOR), Certificación Forestal en Chile (CERTFOR), Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC).

However, all of them failed to see what was obvious to local communities living in the vicinity of plantations: that large scale tree monocultures are intrinsically uncertifiable.

Over the past years, WRM has concentrated its critique on the certification of plantations by the FSC. This may have led to the wrong impression that the other labels were better. If this has been the

case, we apologise. The only reason for concentrating on the FSC was because the participation of social and environmental NGOs provided this system with some credibility. The other labels –promoted by governments and corporations- simply have no credibility at all (see articles below on PEFC, CERFLOR and CERTFOR).

However, having better or worse certification schemes is not the issue. What is needed is not certification but legislation –and compliance with it. The situation is so serious that it cannot be left in the hands of voluntary schemes and consultants to decide whether plantations deserve a label or not: their impacts are such that none of them do.

Legislation must ensure, in the first place, that governments immediately cease to provide plantation companies with any type of subsidies or support.

Secondly, governments must ban further plantations in areas where there is evidence of their negative social and environmental impacts.

Third, governments must carry out independent and participatory research to evaluate the impacts of existing plantations and compensate local peoples for the damages suffered, including devolution of land in cases where it was taken away from them.

Fourth, governments must apply the precautionary principle and prevent the implementation of plantations which might have social and environmental impacts.

The above are only some of the many actions that governments must implement to begin to redress the problems created by their plantation-promotion policies. People from each country or region should decide which ones are applicable and which others need to be added.

September 21st could be a celebration to living organisms that most people see as environmental symbols –trees- but the way in which they are being used for generating profits to some, makes it a necessity to commemorate this third International Day Against Monoculture Tree Plantations. We hope that the need for this Day will no longer be necessary in the very near future.