

Forest restoration with and for their inhabitants

In many cases, forest destruction has created situations of such gravity that company managers and officials -finding themselves cornered by complaints, social pressure or pressure from business sectors whose interests are threatened by the discredit of their activities- are developing their own discourse regarding environmental solutions.

From absolute denial of damages, companies later tried to place responsibility on the victims. They are now attempting to change the true situation through discourse, with statistics showing business success regarding environmental and social matters. However, as the severity of the impacts cannot be concealed, the talk is now of compensation and environmental remediation.

The companies have a discourse and proposals to confuse people and many, either because they are naïve or because it suits them, become entrapped.

Destructive processes are thus called “environmental risk” (as if the impact might not take place). Overcoming these “risks” is called “remediation” (making a parallel with the solution by remedies). The claims arising from damage to property or irreparable damage are called “compensation.”

With these three concepts, an attempt is being made to set aside existing damages, people’s dignity and rights to justice and equity.

Their discourse tries to hide the fact that when nature is affected, the consequences can be accumulative, can produce a trickle down effect on the ecosystems, that can go unperceived initially but that are catastrophic in the medium and long term.

The argument that people’s claims are due to other conditions (such as poverty, the lack of education and health) no longer works and it returns to them just like a boomerang because now it is clear that those conditions are due precisely to environment-destroying processes.

From the communities’ standpoint, reparation is part of the claim. If there is damage to be denounced and it is denounced, it is because damage has to be stopped and if the damage has already been caused then it has to be repaired. However, if reparation is not monitored, the communities can loose twice over.

One of the greatest gaps existing, not only in science, but also in politics or in community management, is to understand the meaning of reparation, its scope, who must repair the damage, how the affected zones have to be restored. That is to say, there is no doubt that this is an essentially political problem and not merely a technical one.

In this framework, the Oilwatch network has prepared a protocol on civil responsibility and restoration, which has been submitted to the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity that is meeting this month in Brazil, with the aim of it being adopted by that international process. Although the protocol has been conceived for oil exploitation zones, it can be

applied to all processes destroying biodiversity. The protocol sets out responsibilities, both for those committing destruction (usually companies), and for those exercising control (the States), without either of them excluding the other. The document is available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/BDC/Oilwatch.html>

The protocol proposes that once damage has been done, restoration must be a process enabling the reconstruction of the social weave, and not one fragmenting, dividing or disorienting communities, or worse even, exposing them to further pressure. At the same time, getting over the damage must be seen with ecological criteria.

It is foreseen that the communities should play a leading role, not only because of their knowledge and rights, but also because restoration must enable them and their organizations to be strengthened.

In the same way as it became clear that the complaints should be in the hands of the affected people and that there would be no one better than them to talk about the problems and the social, cultural and economic impacts, it is clear that restoration must be centred on those same communities. Otherwise a fundamental part of the damage (even assuming good intentions and good techniques in repair), would not be overcome: the recognition of people's rights to decide on their lives and their future.

By Esperanza Martínez, Oilwatch, e-mail: tegantai@oilwatch.org.ec, <http://www.oilwatch.org.ec>