
Argentina: Pine trees advance on the forests of Misiones

Exuberant and majestic forests span the province of Misiones on a plateau with altitudes of up to 800 metres. Its soil is reddish organic matter forming humus up to 30 cm thick that acts like a sponge, retaining water and minerals. Once the cradle of stories and myths, the forest of Misiones is now disappearing.

One of the factors causing its destruction is the large scale plantation of alien pine trees, most of which are intended for making pulp, while the others go to timber industrialization.

At the end of May 2005, the Ecological Group Cuña Pirú from the Province of Misiones invited the WRM International Coordinator, Ricardo Carrere to visit them. On the basis of his direct observations and conversations with the local inhabitants he prepared a report on the impact of pine plantations in this Province.

What follows are some excerpts from this report, centred on the falseness of the affirmation that plantations “take pressure off” the forest.

“In Misiones, 32.5 hectares of woodlands are clearcut per day, that is to say 12,000 hectares disappear every year. Originally the Province had some 2,700,000 hectares of rainforests but presently it is estimated that the area is down to 1,200,000 hectares. That is to say, only 44 per cent of the original forest remains. It is essential to protect what remains as this percentage represents the last continuous remnant of the unique “paranaense” rainforest.

In spite of this process of forest destruction, Misiones is described in Argentina as the ‘country’s main forest province’. In fact it is the province with the greatest percentage of monoculture tree plantations. In the year 2000 there were 318,000 hectares of plantations in this relatively small province (its total area covers almost 3 million hectares). Out of this total, over 80 percent corresponded to *elliottii* and *taeda* pines. Considering that “forestation” is still going on, it is probable that by now over 350,000 hectares are planted with pine.

When talking about plantations, it is usual that they are referred to as a factor helping to protect native forests, affirming that they “take pressure off” timber extraction from forests. The fact that this is rarely true does not dishearten those who make this statement. Such is the case in Misiones. During the few days I spent there, I saw innumerable trucks loaded with large native trees, sadly described by one of the members of Cuña Pirú as ‘funeral hearses promenading the forest on wheels.’

I was also able to observe large piles of the same type of trees in the many sawmills in the area. What is more, according to the Undersecretary for Forests and Forestation of the Ministry of Ecology, Renewable Natural Resources and Tourism of Misiones, there are 379 sawmills in the province that work with native species. To this is added that most of the ‘forests’ one can observe consist of North American pine trees. Monoculture tree plantations of exotic species now occupy the place where formerly the exuberant forest of Misiones developed and, in many cases are established in

‘capueras’ that is to say in areas where the forest has started to re-establish itself.

Furthermore, the plantation companies continue to destroy the forest. I was informed that they still use tractors with chains to pull down the trees, followed by burning. Obviously, before burning, ‘truckloads of good timber’ leave the site to obtain considerable sums of money. Following this, the land is tilled and pre and post emergent weed-killers are sprayed, destroying the possibility of forest regeneration, eliminating the pioneer species that are installed and the re-growth of the trees cut down.

Reforestation implies prior deforestation. And in the case of Misiones, it is not only with the timber they fell that they make a profit. They oblige many farmers to replace crops of all kinds...and they mainly replace families, settlers with pine trees. First, the crisis of the various traditional products and the drop in their prices. They then take over the land, the farms, etc., and fill them with pine trees, giving way to a process of land concentration linked to forestation. As an example, the Chilean company Alto Paraná holds 230,000 hectares of land, that is to say 8 per cent of the total area of Misiones. As in many other countries, this land concentration process, linked to forestation, originates in the low cost of the land, the rapid growth of the trees, the non-existence of restrictions to acquire large extensions of land and state promotion through subsidies.

As an argument in favour of this promotion, it is said that the sector generates thousands of jobs and mention is made of the ‘great amount of labour that is generated by each planted hectare.’ However, what is perceived is a process of urban concentration, linked to abandoning agricultural lands to tree plantations.’

Furthermore, the working conditions of forest workers are poor, most of the tasks are done by pure outsourcing, and it is common for agro-chemicals to be applied without the workers wearing a mask or the appropriate clothing (although the foremen require the mask to be worn around the neck ‘in case there is an inspection’). If anyone complains they are put on the Black List and will never get another job.”

The profit motive of commercial gluttony has swooped down on the forest. Its disappearance is followed by that of its forest peoples and their knowledge, who inhabit that “living cathedral of ferns and serpents,” “full of shadows and green elves” (from a poem by Ramon Avala, an artist from Misiones).

The complete report of Ricardo Carrere’s trip to Misiones can be found at:
<http://www.guayubira.org.uy/celulosa/informeMisiones.html>