
Panama: Mining, forests and indigenous peoples' rights

The isthmus of Panama stretches in Central America, one of the regions of highest natural and cultural diversity in the world. Different forest ecosystems constitute an essential component of such richness. Several indigenous nations have found in the forests their home and source of livelihoods. In Darién, San Blás and Panamá Oriente live the Emberá-Wounan and the Kuna indigenous people, while the Teribe occupy the area of Bocas del Toro, in the border with Costa Rica, together with the Ngobe-Bugle, who also inhabit part of the provinces of Veraguas and Chiriquí Oriente. According to the 1990 National Census, the indigenous population of Panama is composed of 180,700 individuals, which represents 7.8% of the total population of the country.

According to the existing records, since 1850 the forest area has been declining at a high rate. That year forests were estimated to cover 91% of the country's area, even after having suffered a severe process of deforestation caused by the Spanish colonization, which started in the 16th century. During the 20th century the fall was remarkable. For example, between 1950 and 1960 forest cover diminished from 68% to 58%. According to official estimates, in 1992 the forest area was reduced to 3,358,304 hectares, representing 44% of the country's area. Nowadays deforestation rate has been estimated in 75,000 hectares a year.

Even though nowadays Panama has the second largest percentage of primary forests in Central America, and the highest percentage of protected areas (one third of the total forest area) in the region, all of Panama's remaining frontier forests are threatened, and with them the rich natural heritage they hold and the territories and livelihoods of native peoples. Industrial logging, road construction, cocoa production, and mining have been identified as the main causes of deforestation and forest degradation. The construction of the Panama Canal and the projected Pan-American highway across the Darién region, at the border between Panama and Colombia, are clear examples of megaprojects that have already destroyed or are expected to have serious impacts on the forests.

As has also happened in neighbouring Costa Rica (see WRM Bulletin 6) and Nicaragua (see WRM Bulletin 24), mining is resulting in disastrous effects in several areas of the country, generating at the same time conflicts with the indigenous communities that live there. In 1994, 25% of the country area was covered by mining concessions or applications and currently over half of the national territory is open to mining concession applications. Many mining sites are located in the forests and 70% of concessions have been granted in indigenous lands at San Blás, Boca del Toro, Veraguas and Chiriquí. The Panamanian Natural Resources Directorate has reported that 70 % of the approximately 20,000 km² of the national territory deemed to have mining potential is on land claimed by indigenous groups. The government has already approved extensive copper and gold mining concessions within the Ngobe-Bugle and Kuna territories. In the case of Kuna Yala, the concession granted to the Canadian company Western Keltic Mines Inc. extend over more than 50% of the Kuna territory. At the same time, other Canadian companies --such as PANACOBRE, a subsidiary of Tio Mine Resources Inc, Adrian Resource, Innet Mining Corp.-- have been granted important concessions in the Ngöbe Buglé's territory.

Several cases in Panama can be mentioned showing the destructive consequences of industrial

mining development on forests and people that live in them. For example, the Project of Cerro Petaquilla in the Province of Colón will imply the loss of at least 2,500 hectares of forests to give way to the infrastructure for the mine itself and for the roads that will allow access to the area. It is also feared that the project will affect the neighbouring El Copé National Park and the Donoso Forest Reserve. This Province showed the second highest deforestation rate between 1986 and 1992, representing 22.35% of the total forest loss. Another important conflict is that generated by copper exploitation by the Canadian company Panacobre S.A. with the Ngobe-Bugle people at the Province of Chiriquí, which are the largest indigenous group in the country. Although the General Congress of the Ngobe-Bugle has rejected the project, the government has granted the company a concession for 25 years, that can be even extended. The Kuna indigenous peoples --the second largest native nation of Panama-- are also facing the aggression of mining projects in their traditional territories.

The main issue to stop those destructive mining activities and to protect the remaining forests is the recognition of the indigenous peoples traditional rights to their territories --including the subsoil-- resources and culture. The first recognition of an indigenous territory by the Panamanian government was that of the Comarca San Blás and goes back to 1938. In 1983 the Comarca Emberá-Wounan in the Province of Darién was recognized, in 1996 the Comarca Kuna of Madungandi in the Province of Panamá, and in 1997 that of the Ngobe-Bugle, which was the result of a long struggle of this indigenous nation against the interests of miners, loggers and cattle-ranchers which opposed the demarcation and recognition of the indigenous territory.

Indigenous peoples are the ones best placed to be the custodians of the forests and therefore to ensure their conservation. It is thus necessary for further steps to be taken for the recognition of the rights of these peoples to their territories. For more details on this subject, we recommend reading (only in Spanish) "Pueblos Indígenas y Minería en Panamá", Florina López Miró, Asociación Napguana, on our web site at the following address: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Panama/article1.html>

Article based on information from: Segura Olman et al. (eds.), "Políticas forestales en Centro América", San Salvador, 1997; CICAFOC, UNOFOC, UICN, "Comunidades y gestión de bosques en Mesoamérica", San José de Costa Rica, 2000;