
China: Exporting deforestation and promoting tree monocultures

The growth of the Chinese economy, measured in conventional economy terms, is astonishing: its National Gross Product jumped to U\$\$ 4 trillion, which represents a 22-fold increase of its value in 1978. Whether this phenomenon can be considered a success for China and the region is doubtful since, on the one hand, it has been accompanied by important environmental problems in the country itself --among which the loss of significant areas of the country's forests and the expansion of tree monocultures-- and, on the other hand, it has led to deforestation in other countries of the region in order to satisfy the increasing demand for wood of its domestic market.

To face deforestation and subsequent soil erosion, the Chinese government put in place in 1998 a logging ban in 12 provinces, which was extended to 18 in 2000. As a result, national timber production decreased 97% from 1997 to 2000. But wood consumption increased and is currently leading to deforestation in neighbouring countries.

One of those such cases is Burma, where the town of Pianma, located 1,500 miles southwest of Beijing on the far edge of Yunnan province, is currently one of China's gateways into the forests of northern Burma. A massive, unregulated and largely unnoticed timber trade had been depleting the ancient tropical forests of the region. It intensified in 1998 after the above-mentioned logging ban. More than 350,000 cubic metres move through Pianma alone each year. Large amounts also come into China from Burma at towns farther south along the border, like Tengchong, Yingjiang, Zhangfeng, Ruili and Wanding. A Malaysian timber firm is building a bridge across the Salween River, 60 miles north of Pianma near Fugong, to bring in still more logs. According to official statistics, Burma supplies almost 10% of China's imports (740,000 cubic metres) but trustworthy estimations consider that the real volume is twice that high. In Burma, forest cover has dropped from 21% of the country's area in 1949 to less than 7% nowadays. The military dictatorship that rules the country since 1962 has paved the way to transnational logging companies that are devastating the forests and local peoples' livelihoods.

Unfortunately, Burma is one of several examples of deforestation linked to China's economic growth. Imports of Russian softwood logs have also considerably increased over the past two years and Russia now accounts for 42% of all logs that enter China.

Preparations for China's entry into the World Trade Organization have also sparked a further increase in timber imports. In a move for a more open trading system, tariffs on forestry products have fallen drastically, and in many places along China's borders, no tariffs are charged for logs. China's imports of logs have grown from less than 5 million cubic metres in 1998, to more than 10 million in 1999, and to some 15 million in 2000. The country has become the world's second largest importer of wood.

Within such context, the logging ban appears to be but a way of diverting the burden of China's economic growth to other countries. At the same time, the measure is leading to a dramatic increase in monoculture tree plantations within the country.

“As China gets richer, it's natural that it will consume more wood” stated recently a World Bank official. Is that the only answer? Is not the problem more based on the adoption by China of a development model based on a consumption style which results in unsustainable use of internal and external resources?

In the 1940s, India's Mahatma Gandhi was asked by a supporter how long it would be before India was as rich as England. Gandhi's response was: "if it took half of the world to make England as rich as it is, how many worlds will it take to make India that rich?" Is not the same applicable to China?

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