
Costa Rica: environmentally or industrially-friendly forest management?

In the Region Huetar Norte of Costa Rica, the forest area has been reduced to the lowlands of the San Juan River on the border with Nicaragua. What used to be a vast tropical forest that occupied more than 200,000 hectares has been reduced to a mere 30,000 hectares of fragmented forests, most of which severely logged. Unlike what happens in other regions of the country, in Huetar Norte there are no protected areas, all the remaining forests are categorized as wood production forests, and the region's biodiversity is in the hands of forestry management plans. A preliminary study of biodiversity in that area, performed by COECOCEIBA (Friends of the Earth - Costa Rica), identified 141 tree species per hectare, including only those individuals having diameters over 10 centimetres. Such figures indicate that this is one of the most biodiversity rich forests in the country. Additionally, 25 endangered tree species at the national or global level were found, 5 out of which are considered in danger of extinction in Costa Rica. The area is also well known for the existence of the parrot "lapa verde" (*Ara ambigua*), a bird whose population has been decreasing together with the forest area, and nowadays consists of just a few scores of reproductive couples.

Huetar Norte has been one of the major wood producers for domestic use. It has been estimated that no less than 30% of wood consumption in Costa Rica during the last 15 years was supplied by the forest resources of this region. In spite of this, the region is characterized by rural poverty, lack of job opportunities and education, and youth migration in search of a better future.

Nowadays logging is tending to decrease especially because of the shortage of wood. Additionally, according to the new forest management system, post-harvest treatments are being applied which destroy seedlings and even some "non desirable" trees, to favour conditions for the growth of a few commercial species. The basic idea is to standardize the forest, by simplifying its composition so that it becomes something similar to a plantation. A study also performed by COECOCEIBA in one site of the region concluded that some 20 trees per hectare had been purposely destroyed -by killing the standing tree- and that a total of 19 species were affected in this manner. Two of those species are considered to be endangered and one is considered to be a "new" species for science.

The issue is especially serious taking into account that such practices are being financed by official funds devoted to the payment of environmental services for the conservation of forests. Such funds are a kind of incentive offered by the government to the owners of the woodlands with the aim of promoting environmentally friendly management practices regarding biodiversity and the capacity of forests to store carbon.

Several environmental NGOs -among them COECOCEIBA- are working together with peasants' organizations to develop alternative forest management practices, which would mean more benefits to local people and local development, and at the same time the respect of natural rhythms, biodiversity and natural conditions of these rich forests. They have also been denouncing and putting pressures to curb the prevailing forest management practices in the region.

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