
Foresters' willful blindness

Every time we visit an area covered with large scale monoculture tree plantations we find local people faced with the same or very similar problems. In Thailand and Chile, in Brazil or Venezuela. And each time we find foresters denying that those problems even exist.

Our most recent experience on the above matter occurred a few days ago in the country where the WRM secretariat is currently based: Uruguay. In this country, the vast majority of foresters actively support and benefit from the large scale plantation model, mostly based on eucalyptus plantations. Confronted with the negative impacts, they resort to any argument to deny reality. But reality cannot be killed with words.

At the request of a group of small farmers surrounded by eucalyptus plantations, we travelled to Cerro Alegre (which literally means Happy Hill) and found that people there are not only unhappy but extremely angry about the situation they are facing: water has completely disappeared. We visited a number of farms and verified that all the wells had dried up and that this had happened a few years after a Spanish transnational (EUFORES) had planted -subsidized by the state- thousands of hectares of eucalyptus in the surrounding area. None of those wells had ever dried up before and had survived the worst droughts that the country experienced in the past. It is therefore absolutely obvious that the direct cause of this tragedy is to be found in the plantations themselves.

What is the answer coming from foresters? First, that this is impossible, because they have "scientifically" proved that this can't happen in Uruguay. The few foresters that have actually visited the area and listened local peoples' complaints resort to a complementary argument: given that this can't happen, then the problem is that average annual rainfall has diminished. The fact that this is occurring only in plantation areas and not elsewhere is for them irrelevant. And they have gone happily away to their homes, where they can do what Cerro Alegre people can't: open the tap and have water.

Unfortunately, the above example follows the same pattern in totally different realities (India, Spain, Thailand, Portugal, Chile, New Zealand, Brazil, etc.): most foresters continue closing their eyes to reality and rejecting local peoples' empirical experience as "unscientific" and based on ignorance. However, it is clearly foresters themselves who are being unscientific and ignorant.

It is therefore necessary for the plantations campaign to focus on foresters in two ways: firstly, to invite those foresters having a critical view about plantations -who fortunately also exist!- to actively join the campaign and secondly, to denounce the role being played by the mainstream foresters in supporting this socially and environmentally unsustainable plantation model to their own benefit and that of the corporations they support.

