
Costa Rica: all that glitters is not gold

Considering its high standards in Human Development indicators, Costa Rica is an exceptional country in the Central American region. The country has also assumed a leader's position in international environmental fora. In January this year, the Government of Costa Rica hosted the Global Workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation. Nevertheless -as the above article and this one show- not all that glitters . . .

According to the Forestry Law 7575/1996 Costa Rica will pay the owners of forests and tree plantations for "environmental services" in biodiversity conservation, hydrological regulation, carbon sinks, landscape conservation, etc. The costs will be borne using one third of the incomes resulting from a tax of 5% on fuel and by Joint Implementation projects and the funds are administered by FONAFIFO (Fondo Nacional para el Fomento y la Inversion Forestal - National Fund for the Promotion and the Investment in Forestry). However, a lesser amount of money than envisaged has been actually devoted to the payment of environmental services until now.

The state has traditionally promoted "reforestation" only based upon monocultures using a few number of mostly exotic species, basically gmelina, teak, pochote (*Bombacopsis*), pine, and cypress. The afforestation rate between 1988 and 1995 reached 10,547 hectares a year. At the same time, large areas of primary forests are being cut down to give place to tree, as well as banana and pineapple plantations. Monocultures -and not forests- capture most of the funds managed by FONAFIFO.

Costa Rican environmental NGOs and academics are concerned by this situation. In November 1998 the National Commission for the Conservation of the Lapa Verde, integrated by AECO, denounced the felling of a vast area of forests in the northern region -that included fruit trees- to set up gmelina monocultures. AECO is proposing an alternative consisting in afforestation with mixed species. The programme, addressed to small farmers, will be implemented during 1999 and will receive funding for environmental services.

Sources: Javier Baltodano, AECO-Friends of the Earth, Costa Rica, February 1999; Segura, Olman et al. (ed.), *Políticas forestales en Centro America: analisis de las restricciones para el desarrollo del sector forestal*, IICA-Holanda, El Salvador, 1997.