
Chile: an unsustainable forestry model

Forests cover about 30 million hectares in Chile while plantations occupy 2,1 million hectares. Chilean forests -with more than 100 native species- are one of the most biodiversity-rich temperate forests in the world. In marked contrast, 80% of the plantations are composed by radiata pine and 12% by eucalyptus monocultures.

The Chilean forestry model -based upon plantations in spite of the vast and rich forests existing in the country- has been trumpeted as an example for developing countries and one of the factors of the Chilean economic boom. Such model is being promoted in different countries, from Uruguay to Mozambique. Albeit its negative side is not publicized.

The promotion of vast monocultures in Chile began with the military dictatorship in the '70s. In line with the imposed economic model, subsidies and taxes breaks benefitted a few powerful economic groups. Nowadays only two groups -Angelini and Matte- own respectively 470,000 hectares and 340,000 hectares of plantations, involving more than 50 forestry companies in Chile as well as in Argentina, Paraguay and Peru. In the meantime, peasants are expelled from their lands, progressively occupied by plantations or affected by their effects on water and biodiversity. Recent independent studies have revealed that plantations have not helped to alleviate poverty in rural areas and local communities oppose them.

One of the more publicized arguments for the promotion of industrial tree plantations says that fast growing plantations help to alleviate the main pressures on native forests and consequently help to preserve them. This argument has been proved false in Chile. The annual deforestation during the 1985-1994 period reached an annual average of 36,700 hectares, 40% of which were deforested to make way to industrial tree plantations. In the southern VII region -which concentrates the majority of tree plantations- from 1978 to 1987 30% of the Coastal Andean forests were clearcut and substituted by radiata pine plantations.

The pulp industry -closely associated to the plantation scheme- is a relevant polluting factor. Five of the six pulp industries existing in Chile cause strong negative impacts on the environment, while only one is adopting a less harmful production process. The fishing community of Mehuin in the X Region, for example, is opposing the project of Celulosa Arauco y Constitucion S.A. (CELCO) -a huge pulp and paper company- to build a pulp mill coupled with a pipeline that would discharge toxic pollutants resulting from the production process in the bay where they live, affecting the population of fish that is the livelihood of this community, and their own health.

Some of the main consequences of tree monocultures in Chile have been the destruction of native forests, a decrease in water yields, loss of biodiversity and livelihoods of local communities, rural-urban migration, soil erosion and industrial pollution on the one hand and in the concentration of land and wealth on the other. Obviously not a model which can be described as either socially or environmentally sustainable.

