
Uruguay: anti-pulpwood plantation movement on the rise

The situation in Uruguay, where Parliament unanimously passed a forestry law in 1987 to promote industrial tree plantations with almost no opposition from civil society organizations, has radically changed since then. In spite of almost total governmental and academic support to eucalyptus and pine tree plantations, NGO-led opposition has totally changed the scenario. As informed in Bulletin nr 3, the WRM secretariat facilitated the creation of an NGO coalition (the Guayubira Group), which has since been at the centre of a number of anti-plantation and anti pulp mill activities.

The Guayubira Group actively supported a local struggle in the densely planted area of Rio Negro against the installation of a pulp mill near the city of Fray Bentos, which has resulted in the detention of a process which seemed to be impossible to halt. The increasing requirements over environmental controls -mostly resulting from organized public pressure- have apparently made the company desist to build the projected pulp mill.

In the forestry area, the exponential increase of plantations (from some 2,000 annual hectares in the early 1980s to more than 50,000 hectares annually at present), the increased presence of multinationals and foreign capitals investing in plantations and the impacts that such plantations are now having on society and the environment, have resulted in an increasing -though largely uncoordinated- opposition front, including NGOs, trade unions, parliamentarians, cattle-ranchers, farmers, local people and concerned individuals. This has recently led to contradictions within the government itself, where the pro-plantation lobby is losing ground. A few days ago, the Minister of the Environment declared in the state-owned television channel that plantations seem to be having a strong negative impact on soils and water and that his ministry will present an initiative to Parliament to remove all subsidies currently being provided to the plantation industry. An important, though yet insufficient step forward.