



## Issue 142 - May 2009

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## OUR VIEWPOINT

### **- Field trial of genetically modified trees: Belgian government's contribution to International Day for Biological Diversity**

On May 6th, Minister of Science and Innovation of Flanders (Belgium) Patricia Ceyssens planted a tree. Nothing strange in that of course. What was unusual about this type of "green" ceremony was that this was no common tree. It was in fact the first genetically modified poplar to be planted in an open field trial by the Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), to be followed by the planting of 119 more GM poplars over the next few days in the same site.

The presence of the minister came as no surprise, given that VIB is funded by the Flemish government, but her active participation in this particular tree planting activity can also be seen as a political declaration against government officials who opposed this field trial, against organizations such as Nature & Progrès Belgique and Greenpeace Belgium and also against the majority of the general public in Belgium that had expressed negative views about it (one of the reasons provided for the initial refusal to the trial by two federal ministers was that "the public consultation is largely

negative”).

Why did VIB receive such type of political support? What is the importance of this field trial? What is this research aimed at?

To respond to those questions it is first necessary to explain that these poplars have been genetically manipulated so that its wood will have 20% less lignin and 17% more cellulose. Taking into account that lignin is the material that binds the cellulose fibers together and provides strength to the trees, such modification does not seem to make any sense from a biological perspective.

However, it does make a lot of sense from a corporate-profit perspective. And this is what this trial is all about: future profits. Apart from the biotech industry itself –of which VIB is part- this trial is aimed at benefiting two main actors: the pulp and paper industry and the energy industry.

Regarding the first actor, wood with higher levels of cellulose and lower levels of lignin will result in cheaper raw material, because the same amount of wood will contain 17% more cellulose, which is the part of the wood used in pulp production. At the same time, 20% less lignin will mean a cheaper bleaching process, given that lignin causes the yellowing of paper and any lignin remaining has to be bleached. Less lignin therefore means lower bleaching costs.

The second actor –the energy industry- appears to be even more favoured by this research. It was not by chance that VIB received 1.6 million dollars from the American Global Climate and Energy Project, managed by Stanford University, for further research. The main aim of these trees is to serve as raw material for cellulosic ethanol, which is produced from the cellulose contained in the wood. Here again, what matters is the cellulose content –more cellulose, cheaper ethanol. According to the Belgian media, these trees will produce 50% more ethanol than normal poplars.

VIB and the Belgian Biosafety Council will of course promise that this trial will be contained and that no pollen will contaminate nearby native poplars. And this will probably be true. However, it needs to be stressed that this trial is not a scientific academic exercise but a first step towards the obvious aim: the commercial planting – in Belgium and elsewhere- of GM poplars for large-scale production of cellulosic ethanol and pulp for paper. And that would be an environmental disaster.

Poplar is a common species throughout the world and particularly in Europe, where many people grow them for commercial purposes. Poplars have the peculiarity of hybridizing quite easily. This means that the pollen from one species can fertilize the flowers of a different species, resulting in hybrid trees sharing qualities from both species. This is a very well known fact, and foresters have used it to produce many hybrids by crossing different species and even crossing European with American poplars. If GM poplars were to be established in commercial plantations, pollen contamination by GM poplars would become inevitable. The wood of the descendants of the contaminated poplars would contain much less lignin than the original natural species and would thus be easily destroyed by storms and be prone to pest attacks precisely because of their low lignin level. As a result, entire forest ecosystems would

suffer the impacts.

To make matters worse, enormous areas of food producing lands would be taken over –in North and South- by large-scale GM poplar plantations to feed either the cellulosic ethanol business or the pulp and paper business or both.

In sum, Minister Ceyssens did not plant a simple tree. What she planted is one of the major threats ever faced by forest biodiversity, masked under the label of “science and innovation”. What she planted is a symbol of corporate takeover of nature and a first step towards environmental disaster. She probably got a round of applause from VIB officials and their corporate partners. Well deserved for her efforts no doubt.

However, the Belgian government needs to be reminded about its commitments as party to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, which on this same month (May 22nd) commemorates International Day for Biological Diversity, with this year’s theme being none other than “Invasive Alien Species”. Planting GM poplars is clearly a slap in the face to both the convention’s objectives and to this year’s theme. What can there possibly be more alien than a GM poplar, what can be more invasive than that and what can be more effective for destroying biological diversity?

\* for more information see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/GMTrees/Belgiumtrials.html>

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## COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS

### **- Cambodia's Prey Long forest is “equivalent to life itself” for local communities**

Prey Long is the largest area of intact lowland evergreen forest remaining in southeast Asia. It covers an area of about 3,600 square kilometres in the north of Cambodia. The name, “Prey Long”, means “Our forest” in the language of the Kuy indigenous people who live there. Elephants, tigers, bears, gaurs and banteng roam the forest. The hooting of the pileated gibbon can be heard. Hornbills, vipers, wild pigs and rare crocodiles, turtles, otters and frogs live in the forest. Dipterocarp trees tower above the forest canopy, some reaching 45 metres in height.

But Prey Long is under threat. Proposed plans include dozens of mines, plantations, dams, power lines and roads. Illegal logging is taking place. If the plans go ahead, Prey Long would become an industrial zone. The livelihoods of up to 700,000 predominantly indigenous people living in and around the forest are at risk.

A forthcoming video documentary, “One Forest, One Future” by Ben and Jocelyn Pederick, features interviews with some of the local people living in Prey Long. “Kuy people have been custodians of this land since the time of our ancestors,” says Serey Thae. The video shows how people use and protect the forest. “All the big trees have spirits that belong to them. No one cuts those trees,” says Srey Hong. “If they do they will die.”

The threats to Prey Long are part of the third phase of the government's bargain basement sale of the country's land, forests and resources. Phase one: logging concessions. In the 1990s, the government handed over large areas of Cambodia's forest to logging companies. The result was wide scale devastation of the forests. Since 2002, a moratorium on logging concessions has been in place.

Phase two: economic land concessions. Many of these concessions included forest, which companies clearcut. The Tumring Rubber Plantation to the south of Prey Long is one example. In a 2007 report Global Witness documented how the plantation provided the basis for large scale illegal logging of Prey Long by the Seng Keang company, which has close links to the government.

Phase three: exploitation, use and development concessions. The fact that they are not covered by Cambodia's land law does not prevent the government from handing out concessions to mining companies, often covering hundreds of square kilometres. In some cases, no exploration or exploitation licenses exist in the concession area. Global Witness found that millions of dollars in payment for several concessions has simply gone missing.

Of the many mining concessions in and around Prey Long, the largest belongs to Kenertec, a South Korean company which describes itself as "The leader of the environmental energy industry in the 21st century". In 2008, Kenertec took over 85 per cent of an iron ore mine in Rovieng District, on the northern border of the Prey Long forest. The mine was previously under the control of the China National Machinery & Equipment Import & Export Corporation (a Chinese state-owned company), Pheapimex (one of Cambodia's most powerful companies, responsible for extremely destructive logging and plantation projects covering vast areas of Cambodia's forests) and the Rattanak Stone Cambodia Development Company (which is controlled by the Commander-in-Chief of the Cambodian Army, Pol Saroeun). The mine site is protected by soldiers, employed by Kenertec.

Kenertec also has exploration rights for eight sites in Cambodia, covering a total area of 1,520 square kilometres, according to the company. Kenertec plans to mine copper, lead, zinc, iron, manganese, silica and jewels. The concession is to the north of Prey Long and overlaps a large area of the forest.

Kenertec also has 60,000 hectares of economic land concessions covering what it calls "scrub-covered land". Kenertec plans to plant rubber trees, cassava and jatropha. A biomass power plant is also planned. The concession area is six times the area allowed under Cambodia's land law.

"Our people are worried," Ru Lark, a villager in Stung Treng told video makers Ben and Jocelyn Pederick. "How many years does the forest have left? How long can Prey Long survive?" Serey Thae takes the film crew into the forest. "Here's the evidence," he says, pointing. "Trees are being cut, as big as 130 cm wide. And then they've been burnt. From the mountain to the plains, the trees have been cut down."

Dr Andrew McDonald of the University of Texas has been studying southeast Asia's rainforests for 15 years and is extremely concerned about Prey Long. In an article in

the Phnom Penh Post last year, he notes that there is only one detailed scientific publication about lowland rainforest in Cambodia. That study looked at an area of forest near Sihanoukville in the south of the country. Today, the forest is gone, replaced by a monoculture acacia plantation.

Prey Long, southeast Asia's most important remaining area of lowland rainforest, could face a similar fate.

In 2008, Global Witness interviewed a Kenertec employee. He spoke about Cambodia's potential as an investment opportunity. "I see money everywhere," he said. "In the trees, in the land, everywhere!" The contrast with villagers' view of the forest could hardly be more extreme. "Everything we need comes from the forest," explains En Nam, a villager from Kampong Thom province. "You can't put a value on the forest. It is equivalent to life itself."

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>

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### **- Ecuador: Disputes against shrimp farming contribute to women's lib**

In Muisne, on the Northeast coast of Ecuador, the inhabitants have developed a lifestyle adapted to mangrove ecosystems, based on fishing and gathering shellfish and crabs. However, their livelihood has been under threat since the eighties, when shrimp farming started expanding in the region (WRM Bulletin nº 51, October 2001).

Until the sixties, mangroves were considered as useless and valueless swamps by the Government, allowing the local inhabitants to carry out their traditional activities, such as hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants for food, medicines and building. Then and even now, the mangroves were public State-owned lands, under local community management. In this framework, mangrove destruction and privatization by the shrimp industry were illegal. The shrimp farmers took over the land for their own benefit and the Government even granted them concessions, sometimes based on false reports (WRM Bulletin No. 14, August 1998, No. 21, March-June 1991, No. 36, July 2000).

As a result, from 1989 onwards, the inhabitants organized themselves against mangrove destruction and privatization and claimed recognition of their traditional rights to use this ecosystem. The first group was set up in 1991 in Muisne, which became the Ecological Defence Foundation (Fundación de Defensa Ecológica - FUNDECOL). Later on, the dispute spread to the whole canton and become a social movement upheld by the mangrove communities and in particular by the women shell-gatherers, who gather shells and other molluscs from mangroves.

The movement grew, thanks to the establishment of "user groups" in the various villages in the canton. These groups started denouncing illegal mangrove clearing to FUNDECOL, which later submitted these complaints to the administration. Thus an efficient monitoring network was set up submitting over 20 years, some one thousand complaints and in 2003 obtaining an important achievement: the creation of a 5,000

hectare mangrove reserve managed by FUNDECOL and user groups. Unfortunately, between 60% and 90% of the mangrove cover had already been lost. However, FUNDECOL and the user groups had already started reforestation and other activities aimed at promoting the revival of local culture: cookery competitions based on mangrove products, murals explaining their struggle, the creation of music and poetry groups, literacy courses, etc.

Several members of these groups composed songs. One of these composers was Tania Bone Cagua, who lives in the village of Bolivar where a group of "concheras" (women shell gatherers) were determined to struggle and protect their livelihood and environment. These women feed their families and earn some money from gathering shellfish, mainly a clam-like shell. Tania learnt to read and write thanks to FUNDECOL's literacy classes. Her capacity to express herself in writing and to have the courage to speak in public, are among the main talents that she discovered in herself thanks to the struggle and she is very grateful for this. She wrote several militant songs and we are attaching three of them: "Tristeza del manglar" (Mangrove Sadness), "Conchera soy" (I am a shell-gatherer), and "Benditos camarones" (Damned shrimp-farmers). They can be accessed at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/Canciones.html>

The women from Bolivar explained that they have simultaneously had to face two problems: shrimp farming and domination by men. In fact, during the demonstrations that took place to protect the mangroves, the village women were more active than the men. They started action on a public level, hitherto undertaken by men, such as leaving their homes and usual chores to take part in demonstrations, meetings and reforestation activities or to cover many kilometres to complain to the authorities about the illegal clearing of mangroves by the shrimp farmers. This phenomenon led to many cases of domestic violence, as the husbands were opposed to such activities. However, the group and the aim of the struggles gave the women the necessary support to question and re-negotiate power relationships in their favour. Now it is they who "know" the mangrove ecosystem, it is they who struggle successfully to protect it. This gives them considerable material and symbolic autonomy.

Here below are some excerpts from Tania Bone Cagua's three songs

### **Mangrove sadness**

*How sad it has been to live without the mangroves  
that the shrimp-farmers wanted to cut down  
And now it is up to us shell-gatherers  
to struggle and struggle and reforest again*

**I am a shell-gatherer** tells us of the devalued status of shell-gatherers, as it is a poor woman's task.

*So what do they want, what do they want me to do?  
To be happy like on a holiday  
while the mangroves are disappearing?  
Do they want me to laugh?  
For laughter to split my face like a fool?  
For even governments have negotiated mangroves  
I am a shell-gatherer and don't pity me.*

### **Damned shrimp-farmers**

*In the world the most wonderful thing that happened to me  
Is to watch the group of women struggling for mangroves  
They say we are tomboys but this is not true  
We defend our ecosystem because we find species in it  
We find shellfish there, our livelihood  
We also find crabs, tasqueros and snails*

Although mangrove inhabitants have struggled all these years, in the autumn of 2009, the government of President Correa legalized the illegal privatization of mangroves by shrimp farmers, ratifying their rights in a legal writ. Two previous governments had attempted to legalize the shrimp industry in Ecuador but the social movement organized by associations for mangrove defence had halted the process. This autumn, FUNDECOL and user groups also organized big demonstrations in several cities, including Quito, to protest against this law that will forever undermine their possibility of claiming the mangroves. However, the Government has no intention of changing its decision or of allowing the local inhabitants to collectively manage mangrove areas. The policy of President Correa's government is framed in the conventional line of export economy, based on ransacking natural resources, without caring for their sustainable use or for the promotion of food security and sovereignty, considering that 95% of the shrimp production is for export. Thus it is the western countries that benefit from this luxury food, while the ecological and social impacts are localized in the producer country and are mainly a burden on the poorer population. Along these lines, the present Government also promotes industrial tree plantations and major open cast mining projects, against the will of the people represented as a whole by the National Environmental Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Ambiental).

Sandra Veuthey, e-mail: [Sandra.Veuthey@campus.uab.es](mailto:Sandra.Veuthey@campus.uab.es). Article based on the author's field observations.

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### **- Gabon: Marc Ona Essangui awarded 2009 Goldman Environmental Prize**

At a ceremony held in San Francisco, USA on 20 April 2009, Marc Ona Essangui was presented with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, which recognizes grassroots activists who take significant risks to protect the environment and communities in their countries.

A founding member and executive secretary of Brainforest, a leading Gabonese environmental NGO founded in 1998, Marc Ona was one of six recipients of the prize this year, which is awarded annually to environmental activists in six different regions of the world. Marc Ona was selected primarily for his efforts to protect and preserve Ivindo National Park, located in northeastern Gabon, from the controversial Belinga iron ore mining project, which calls into question the country's commitments to environmental protection.

Ivindo National Park is situated in the Congo Basin rainforest, the world's second



largest after the Amazon rainforest. With the support of other members of Gabonese civil society, Marc Ona headed up a major campaign to inform both the Gabonese public and the international community about the potential social and environmental consequences of the Belinga mining project, and to demand that the government carry out all of the necessary social and environmental impact assessments.

Marc Ona is also at the forefront of the Gabonese civil society efforts to raise awareness of the need for transparent and responsible management of the revenues generated by the mining sector. He is the national coordinator of the Publish What You Pay (PWYP) coalition in Gabon, which has fought for greater transparency around the government's negotiations with a Chinese mining consortium for the Belinga iron ore mining project.

With regard to the construction of a hydroelectric dam as part of the Belinga project, Marc Ona told the Pan African News Agency: "We believe that the reasons to protect Ivindo National Park also include Kongou Falls (located inside the park), which form part of our national heritage." Brainforest has launched an international petition through its website to save what is widely known as "the most beautiful waterfalls in Central Africa".

The many battles spearheaded by this tireless environmental activist also include his tenacious opposition to the construction of an airport north of Libreville in the Mondah Forest, which is a legally protected area. Under Marc Ona's leadership, the Gabon Environmental Platform, comprising close to 20 environmental NGOs, mobilized forces to warn of the consequences of this project, particularly the dangers it entailed for Akanda National Park, an internationally recognized site for migratory birds.

A similar mobilization of Gabonese NGOs, with Brainforest in the lead, took place to harshly condemn the conduct of the French energy group AREVA and its failure to rehabilitate the uranium mines formerly run by its affiliate COMUF in southern Gabon. The company is now being charged by local communities for numerous cases of poisoning and health problems.

Marc Ona is also an active member of the multi-stakeholder national committee (or Interest Group) responsible for the implementation in Gabon of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). The EITI is an international initiative to promote greater transparency in the oil, gas and mining sectors, and involves cooperation and dialogue between governments, companies and civil society. Gabon joined the EITI in 2004.

For Brainforest: Gualbert Phal Mezui Ndong, Communications and International Relations Officer, and Protet Judicaël Essono Ondo, Programme Coordinator,  
<http://www.brainforest.collectivex.com>

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## **- Peru: Amazon peoples, bastions of resistance**

Since 9 April, the communities of the Peruvian Amazon have started what they have



called an “indefinite strike” all over the Peruvian Amazon, in response to the failure of the Congress of the Republic to repeal six decrees considered prejudicial to the indigenous peoples. These decrees were issued by the Executive in the framework of the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and involve the imposition of industries destroying the Amazon and its inhabitants, such as mining, oil exploitation and timber plantations.

The International Human Rights Federation (IHRF) considered that the decrees threaten the rights of the Amazon indigenous peoples (1), while the Congress of the Republic also adopted a Report by a Special Commission, proposing that some of these decrees be revoked (2).

The seriousness of the threat that involves putting the Amazon up “for sale” is reflected in one of the examples quoted by the expert Roger Rumrill: “Oil plot No. 76, covering one million five hundred hectares, will install 18 seismic lines, build 166 heliports, open up 1944 unloading areas and install 166 camping sites. This plot will literally swallow up the Amarakaes Community Reserve and will operate in the buffer zones of the Manu and Bahuaja-Sonene National Parks and in the Tambopata-Candamo Reserve. This means that it will seriously affect one of the areas containing the world’s greatest biodiversity.” (3) In spite of protests, President Alan Garcia authorized the Perenco Company to invest 2 billion dollars in oil activities at Lot 67, located in Loreto. (4)

The Amazon protest started last July (see WRM Bulletin No. 132), although subsequently it was suspended because the Congress of the Republic committed itself to address the claim. However, as stated by AIDSEP leaders “Far from keeping their promises, the legislature issued Law 29317 that modifies and incorporates various articles into decree 1090, known as the Forestry and Wildlife Law.”(5) And so the mobilizations were reinitiated.

In a direct communication with WRM, the organization Grufides reported that “socio-environmental disputes have grown in the country. In Cajamarca, mining is the source of innumerable disputes that have become increasingly violent because of the impunity provided to those that hold power at the regional level. Hundreds of peasants can find that their water has been affected, such as the peasants using the Quilish canal in Porcon –in addition to being denounced and penalized when they react against this– while the mining company responsible for this pollution goes unpunished. In Choropampa, San Juan and Magdalena, thousands of peasants suffered mercury poisoning and even now are demanding solutions to their health problems that have not been addressed, either by the State or by the company that caused this serious accident. In the Province of San Marcos, two teachers, a regional councillor and seven peasants may be sent to prison in the next few days for having protested against a Brazilian mining company that went as far as hiring criminals to threaten the organized peasant leaders. The laws menace peasants who are defending their rights, while the responsible company officials remain in total impunity and are supported by authorities at all government levels. These past weeks have seen the greatest strike ever in the history of Peru.”

As reported by Servindi, Kichua and Arabela indigenous peoples blocked the

passage of vessels along the Napo and Curaray rivers in protest against the failure to comply with the document signed between the authorities and the Repsol oil company.” (6) Also AIDSEP has been informing of the several actions of hundreds of indigenous people, peasant farmers and civil society members who joined in the march from different parts of the region. In the Santiago, Cenepa and Santa María de Nieva River basins, they marched to protest against the mining and oil companies that are trying to take over their lands. The highway that connects Yurimaguas and Tarpoto was blockaded with logs and stones at the kilometre 46 mark, while inhabitants of indigenous communities in the San Martín region set up a road block at kilometre 5 of the Fernando Belaunde Terry highway in the Maronilla district. In the Alto Amazonas region, 7,000 peasants and indigenous people from the Shawi, Cocama and Cocamilla communities occupied the port of El Vado in Yurimaguas, forcing a halt to trade and land and river transportation. In Bagua, the highway that leads to the district of Santa María de Nieva was blockaded with dozens of cars. Asháninka indigenous people occupied the Atalaya airport in Ucayali. Machiguenga indigenous people from Bajo Urubamba and Alto Urubamba, members of COMARU, blocked vehicular traffic and river transportation into Bajo Urubamba. The headquarters of the sub-region of Santa Clotilde in the district capital of Napo was occupied by Kichwa and Arabela indigenous people, with the backing of residents from numerous surrounding districts and Santa Clotilde, which is situated near the midway point of the Napo River. Blockades were also set up across the upper and lower stretches of the river, which further obstructed the passage of boats travelling between Iquitos and the Ecuadorian border. Hundreds of Awajún and Wampi indigenous people marched on Petroperú Stations 5 and 6 – which form part of the Northern Peru oil pipeline – and occupied the facilities. In the Plaza de Armas de Jaén, residents of the city of Baguá started a protest vigil against the policies of the García government. The Kichwa people of the Alto Putumayo region, on the Colombian border, joined in the Amazon general strike, while Andean indigenous communities staged protests in support of their Amazonian brothers and sisters. (7) According to information provided by Thomas Quirynen, collaborator in the South for Catapa, three petrol stations (nr. 5, 6 and 7) were occupied by the protesters as a direct result of the radicalisation of the strike; because of this action the pumping of crude oil has been suspended (see full article and photos at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Peru/strike.html>).

However, the demands of the Amazon peoples are ignored by the Government and in general, the mass media does not report on what is actually happening. On Saturday 9 May the Government decreed a state of emergency in nearly all the Amazon territory, leaving the door open to violation of the human rights of the Amazon citizens who are struggling to defend their lives from the threat of uncontrolled encroachment by oil, mining, gas and forestry companies.

On 10 May, President Alan García ordered repression of the Awajun and Wampi indigenous peoples who were protesting on the Corral Quemado bridge at Bagua Grande. They were dispersed by force with the use of tear gas, blows and bullets resulting in ten people injured, three of them seriously, seven arrests and several disappearances.

Indigenous, peasant and agrarian organizations from all over the country announced that they would intensify measures “until we have Legislative Decrees 994, 1064, 1020,

1080, 1081, 1083, 1089, 1060, 995 and the Water Resources Law repealed.” (8) Indigenous organizations participating in the Amazon-Andean National Meeting in preparation for the Fourth Continental Summit Meeting of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of the Abya Yala, to take place this month in Puno, declared that “Although these laws have been declared unconstitutional both by the Constitutional Tribunal and by the Multiparty Congress Commission, there is no political will to repeal them.” They convened the indigenous communities from all over the country to comply with the “National Rising” to be held as from 7 July, as a measure of protest.

The testimonial of another Peruvian friend, whose identity we will keep anonymous, reflects the situation: “I am a leader of this strike and I have been threatened with death. This doesn’t matter, if I must lose my life for my brothers and sisters, my children and the world, then so be it. We need the world to know about our struggles. Give us a hand to save the planet. We have no economic support, we do what we can. Our Shawi, Aguaruna and Wambiasa brothers and sisters, we will not lose faith; if it is necessary we will sacrifice our lives to defend our lands and our forests. Friends, be our voices in the world. Thank you a thousand times on behalf of our Mother Nature.”

- (1) “Perú: FIDH insta derogar DL que atentan contra la Amazonía”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11439>
- (2) “Perú: Congreso aprueba Informe que deroga decretos legislativos”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11357>
- (3) “Perú: Estado de emergencia contra los pueblos indígenas amazónicos”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/11436>
- (4) “Perú: García autorizó inversión de Perenco por \$2 mil millones en Loreto”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11155>
- (5) “Perú: AIDESEP y Ejecutivo crean Mesa de Diálogo para atender demandas de indígenas amazónicos”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/10713>
- (6) Information from AIDESEP, <http://www.aidesep.org.pe>
- (7) “Perú: Amazónicos inician paro indefinido por incumplimiento del Congreso”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/10257>
- (8) “Perú: Andinos y amazónicos acuerdan radicalizar protesta”, Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11414>.

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### **- Strong protest against WWF’s plans to certify the unsustainable industrial aquaculture**

The rapid rise in global demand for cheap shrimp and farmed salmon has caused extensive degradation of mangrove wetlands and other coastal ecosystems and subsequent losses in biodiversity. These losses have also destroyed livelihoods among local communities and indigenous peoples in many nations across the global South.

Without changing the production-commercialisation-consumption pattern, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) plans to create a certification body for the industrial production of shrimp and salmon which would just “greenwash” the unsustainable industrial

aquaculture.

Over 70 human rights and environmental groups from around the world have expressed outrage at the planned launch of the World Wildlife Fund's Aquaculture Stewardship Council, in a letter sent today to leading members of WWF, which is reproduced below:

“Letter to WWF from 70 International NGO Networks, Organizations and Individuals Opposing the Formation of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council

We the undersigned non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and concerned individuals from around the world are deeply troubled by the intentions of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to form the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). Strong opposition to this latest among many such recent certification initiatives is based upon our years of collective experience in working to counter the negative effects of the industrial aquaculture of shrimp, salmon and other carnivorous marine fin-fish species. We see the ASC as yet another attempt by a Big International NGO to formulate some ill-conceived plan to remedy the problems of unsustainable industrial aquaculture. These kinds of flawed remedies do not involve the local communities and grassroots movements in the process of defining steps to be taken, thereby excluding those peoples most affected by these industries' ongoing assaults on ocean health and coastal integrity.

Current attempts by WWF and other intended certifiers are not supported by local communities and indigenous peoples, the global network of NGOs, academics and citizens who are still demanding a moratorium on further expansion of these socially disruptive and ecologically destructive industries.

Having gained a better understanding of the proposed mechanism for developing global standards for industrial aquaculture, we NGOs and representatives of regional NGO networks and organizations from Asia, Latin America, Africa, Europe and North America must continue to take a strong stance against these various certification schemes. We believe that these attempts at certification are funder and industry driven, and do not allow the voice of the majority of affected stakeholders – local communities and indigenous peoples - to have meaningful input into this so-called "dialogue" and standard-setting process.

The proposed standards that will define the Aquaculture Stewardship Council appear to be largely based upon supporting unsustainable, open throughput systems of aquaculture production, whether for shrimp, salmon or other fin-fish species, and not upon more sustainable closed production approaches, indicating that the proposed ASC's process is aimed in an inappropriate and environmentally dangerous direction.

We demand that WWF halt this initiative to form the ASC and immediately initiate real and meaningful dialogues with affected communities, not just with industry and a few NGOs and academics. There still is a great need for strict social and rights-based standards, not just environmental and technical fixes initiated at the aquaculture farm level. That vital component of the dialogues with the local communities and indigenous peoples is still missing, and their voices are still not heard within those elite circles

that are now attempting to form the ASC. We the undersigned now join hands to strongly state our opposition to the ASC process.

(See letter with signatures and press release at

<http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/mangroves/aquaculturecertification.pdf> )

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## COMMUNITIES AND TREE MONOCULTURES

### **- Australia: Concern over plantations swept under the carpet by environmental movement**

Australia like all colonial countries was founded upon the theft of indigenous peoples land. However in Australia, the authorities took the theft one step further by declaring the continent to be 'Terra Nullius', meaning an empty land or a land belonging to nobody. Terra Nullius guaranteed indigenous people no legal rights, for how could they have rights if legally they did not exist?

In the southern parts of Australia, that meant that the indigenous survivors of the massacres and disease were rounded up onto mission stations and 'removed from most white people's view'. With the indigenous population dislocated from their countries, Europeans moved in and attempted to 'Europeanise' the land, mostly with disastrous results.

Widespread clearing of the land took place both for agricultural expansion and forestry. An indigenous description of the environmental carnage that eventuated described it as; 'like a plague of locusts descending upon the land, devouring everything in sight'.

By the late 1960's and early 1970's export wood chipping operations increased the rate of destruction of native forests. 40-50% of the native forest timber produced in Australia was exported to Japan as woodchips. By the 1990's that figure had increased to 80%.

Also in the 1960's, efforts to fund an expansion of Australia's plantation base occurred and resulted in the clearing of large tracts of native forests. Conservationists were opposed to such plantation establishment, as they were to the clearfelling of large tracts of native forest. Essentially the conservation movement in Australia was dominated by groups wanting to protect the natural biodiversity of the nation's forests.

However by 1989 Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology published a paper called "No Need for Conflict". The paper was written by Judy Clark (a resource economist and ex government bureaucrat) and Margaret Blakers (a forest campaigner). The paper began promoting the view that with a growing plantation base it was possible for Australia to stop logging native forests entirely, with all of the country's sawn timber needs coming from softwood plantations and pulp from softwood and hardwood plantations. Plantations established in the 1960's were ready to be logged meaning that a large volume of plantation timber was available.

The first group to publicly endorse this position was The Wilderness Society in 1991 who encouraged consumers of timber to be 'ethical' by only buying plantation timber. In July 1995 Australia's State and Territory Conservation Councils commissioned the report "Australia's Plantations" by Judy Clark. This report brought together information from the entire country, again with the agenda of speeding the transition from native forests into plantations. In 1996 the Australian Conservation Foundation also endorsed a no native forest logging policy. The Greens political party was also active in supporting plantations.

Barely no mention was made by pro-plantation groups of the obvious problems with plantations, such as pesticide use and water consumption or (shock horror) indigenous land rights. Previously, environment groups had been critical of industrial forestry in all its shapes and guises. Plantation criticism from the mid 1990's would now only come from a small minority in the movement and from communities impacted by plantations.

By 1996 ENGO groups such as Friends of the Earth who questioned the sustainability of plantations started to come under increasing pressure to support a no native forest logging stance and a rift developed in the forest movement, with people critical of plantations either sidelined or ignored completely. A plantations only policy was one that FoE could not support because only two years earlier FoE activists in Tasmania had been poisoned with Atrazine leaching from a eucalypt plantation at Lorinna. How could FoE endorse a plantation policy that poisoned domestic water supplies!"

Criticism included any logging of native forest for any purpose. Restoration forestry, eco-logging, firewood harvesting etc etc were all treated with suspicion. Essentially then the majority of the Australian environmental movement had by 1996 been voluntarily captured by the plantation only 'no-native forest logging' ideology.

In 1997 the State and Federal Government's announced the 2020 Vision, which essentially would see a trebling of Australia's plantation base by the year 2020. From one million hectares to three million hectares. Criticism of the Vision (one of Australia's largest ever corporate land grabs) was almost non-existent from ENGO's. How could a movement almost fully supportive of plantations come out and criticize a plan to treble their size? What a bonus for the plantation companies!

Likewise with plans to quicken up the pace of plantation development in an international sense, how could Australian ENGO's fully criticise plantation development in other countries when they supported similar development in their own country?

With Forest Stewardship Council entering Australia in 2002, the nascent Environmental Chamber could not agree on certification in native forests and since that time certification has occurred only in plantations under interim standards.

In summary, the push for plantations in Australia by ENGO's has come as a result of widespread destruction of native forests and desperate attempts to save what is left from the woodchippers. However in their haste to promote plantations a number of key ecological and social concerns with plantations have been entirely "swept under the carpet" by the 'environmental movement. This has left the fight against plantations in

Australia to unfunded communities and a sparse scattering of environmentalists, including myself.

By Anthony Amis, Friends of the Earth Melbourne, email: [anthonyamis@hotmail.com](mailto:anthonyamis@hotmail.com)

Further information on this issue is available at:

<http://www.hancock.forests.org.au>

<http://www.baddevelopers.green.net.au/Docs/bluegumswesternvic.htm>

<http://www.baddevelopers.green.net.au/Docs/talltreespot.htm>

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### **- Cambodia: Indigenous people confronted with a rubber plantation empire**

In the remote Cambodian province of Mondulhiri, the villagers of Busra feel their future fragile and uncertain since the Cambodian government has decided to grant an economic concession to a project of rubber plantation on their ancestral lands. Some of them have sold their land thinking that money was the only reliable thing they could get after months and months of defiance and mistrust. Their mistrust was turned against Khaou Chuly Development (KCD), the Cambodian shareholder denounced for its brutal methods and more recently against its partner in the joint venture between Khaou Chuly and Socfinal, a subsidiary company of the Bolloré Group, key actor in the rubber plantations in Africa.

In December 2008, the tension was so high as well as their need to be heard, that hundreds of ethnic Bunong villagers from the Busra commune protested against the company Khaou Chuly, perhaps the most important construction and engineer company in Cambodia, who had started clearing the forest and fields close to their village. The demonstration turned violent as the villagers torched and smashed vehicles belonging to the company. People were angry because the company's land clearing disrupted their agricultural activities, as family farms and crops have been destroyed to make space for the rubber trees nursery. The land, 2,700 hectares, was granted to the joint venture Socfin KCD by the government late in 2007.

According to the villagers, the company offered them three options: relocate the families on other farmland of the same size; pay a compensation to the families who would accept to leave their land; let them stay on their land if they produce rubber and they will get a share of the profit from the company. But at that time, these solutions did not appear fair to the villagers who simply asked to get their land back (Cambodia Daily, December 22, 2008).

Few days after the protest, a meeting was organized, at the Busra referral commune hall, attended by villagers, company representatives, commune, district and provincial authorities, commune councilors, villages' chiefs and NGOs workers.

There, 1,030 families from seven villages -the majority of them Bunong- declared that the land belonged to them, because they have been using it for their rotational farming activities since decades, and they have legal ownership according to the Land Law, which protect indigenous common property rights. The meeting failed, as the villagers



accused the authorities of being biased in favor of the company. According to the authorities, villagers will benefit from the company, getting new jobs, hospitals, schools and houses for rubber workers. But the villagers didn't agree, and claim instead that if anybody wants to improve the living standards of the people, they should come and discuss with the people first, not just send equipment and start clearing land (Cambodia Daily December 24, 2008). The company represented during the meeting wasn't just Khaou Chuly but a new entity, Socfin KCD, who wasn't mentioned by the national media.

Only on April 8 2009, it was announced by the daily newspaper Phnom Penh Post that a joint rubber deal had been signed, between "France's Socfina and the Khaou Chuly Group to create 10,000 hectares rubber plantation and processing facilities in Monduliri". The President of Khaou Chuly declared that "his company was providing 30% of the total capital, with the other 70 percent to be supplied by the French company."

In fact, the name of Socfina seems to be wrong as everybody on the field talk about Socfin. According to our research, this company is based in Cambodia, directed by Philippe Monnin, a French expert in rubber plantation who worked for years as consultant for the Cambodian ministry of Agriculture on projects of family scale rubber plantations in Kompong Cham province.

On the web ([www.socfinal.lu](http://www.socfinal.lu)) it appears that Socfin KCD is owned at 60% by Socfinasia, which is held at 53% by Socfinal, a holding based in Luxemburg. Socfinal is a mixed group, which is controlled by Belgian families, amongst them the Fabri, and held at 38% by a French financial and agribusiness group, lead by Bolloré. Questioned on the main shareholders of Socfin in Cambodia, a source gave the names of the French Vincent Bolloré, and the Belgian Hubert Fabri. Two names that come again and again in this galaxy. So Socfin KCD is one of this constellation of companies involved in the rubber plantations in Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Congo (RDC), Kenya, Cameroon, Liberia and Indonesia and... Cambodia. A recent article by the French newspaper Le Monde diplomatique informs us about the activities in Africa of the Bolloré group (Port, rail, plantations: le triste bilan de Bolloré au Cameroun, [www.monde-diplomatique.fr](http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr) April 2009).

Socfin KCD is also one of these subsidiary companies of companies founded with cross holdings, a system that allows the shareholders, always the same small group of persons, to save a maximum profit and pay minimum taxes. Of course they are located in tax havens where the profits disappear. A very interesting investigation written by a French journalist, Martine Orange, has been published in February 2009 by the web newspaper Mediapart (the investigation is available at this address: [www.mediapart.fr/files/Bolloré iliad.pdf](http://www.mediapart.fr/files/Bollor%C3%A9_iliad.pdf)).

This opaque world of the finance, the people of Busra have no idea about. They can not imagine the benefits a rubber plantation can bring on the long term; their land is bought between 200 and 300 \$ per hectare (that's the range of prices given by watchdogs in Busra, and is very low compared to average price). Now the tension has fallen, and has left to division, disillusion and mistrust: some people are hopeless, while other are confident in the bright future that the company disclose to them. Socfin

KCD does not skimp efforts: they invited the local VIPs to a meal washed down with plenty of beer and offered a huge show to the villagers during festivities which included the most famous comics of the Cambodian scene, sexy girls and beautiful fireworks.

Recently, the Agence française de développement, the French Development Agency (AFD) has visited the place. They might be interested to support family rubber plantations around the Socfin KCD concession, and they are going to ask for a social, economic and environmental impact assessment of the concession project. None of such assessments has been done before granting the concession.

The villagers still complain, they want to be part of development, and do not want that others choose for them. They want to be considered and they want their culture to be valued and respected. Socfin KCD continues to work, especially on communication and public relations. Other actors, government, authorities, international organizations, are silent. Will the villagers let them convince or will they resist? And who will support them in this struggle?

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### **- Chile: Opposition to government subsidies for the expansion of monoculture tree plantations**

In response to the global economic crisis that erupted late last year, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet has announced a series of measures to foster job creation and economic recovery. One of the most surprising measures is the decision to temporarily increase the subsidies granted to tree plantations under Decree Law 701.

Decree Law 701, also known as the Forestry Promotion Law, is the main instrument underlying a forestry model that has contributed to the unjust and voracious appropriation of land, and the expansion of monoculture tree plantations into areas formerly covered by native forest and fertile farmland. The law was passed in 1974, during the Chilean military dictatorship, which also facilitated the occupation of Mapuche indigenous territory. Land ownership became concentrated in the hands of two major economic groups: the Matte family group (CMPC) and the Angelini group (Copec–Arauco–Celco). The law provides subsidies amounting to 75% of the net costs of establishing plantations, in addition to tax exemptions and guaranteed protection against expropriation of the land.

A few months before announcing this new measure, President Bachelet had met with high-level executives from these companies to pledge the government's contribution of three billion pesos to the Bioenercel Technological Consortium. This consortium was formed by three major forestry companies (Arauco, CMPC and Masisa), the University of Concepción, the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso and Fundación Chile to conduct research on the production of so-called second-generation biofuels –specifically, the production of fuel from pine and eucalyptus biomass- which represents a further incentive for the increased expansion of monoculture tree plantations.

These latest measures come on top of the government's ongoing support and commitment to the goal of an additional one million hectares of plantations in 10 years. In other words, the new "anti-crisis forestry measure" reaffirms the government's support to this sector, alluding to the fact that it is a sector that is highly sensitive to the ups and downs of the global economy, since more than 90% of the wood and pulp produced is exported. These government aid measures ignore the countless demands of communities who are struggling to survive surrounded by thousands of hectares of pine and eucalyptus monoculture plantations, or who suffer from the contamination of their water as a result of the pulp industry.

Alarmed by this situation, the Foresters' Association for Native Forests declared in a public statement that this forestry model "dominated by transnationals that have established vast areas of alien tree specie monocultures over the last three decades, accumulating wealth in very few hands and displacing rural populations," is not sustainable. They called on the government to stop granting subsidies to large forestry companies because of the damage they cause to the environment and water resources, in addition to the social and cultural impacts on nearby communities. They urged President Bachelet to halt the growth of tree plantations, stressing that the Chilean government must not be an accomplice to this disaster. They also highlighted the urgent need to strengthen policies for medium- and small-scale agriculture, the sector most affected by the change in land use, and to develop a democratic land use management system. (The full statement is available in Spanish at [http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/Ingenieros\\_Forestales.html](http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/Ingenieros_Forestales.html))

Meanwhile, 26 Mapuche indigenous, social and environmental organizations gathered in Temuco for a meeting on "Impacts of Tree Plantations on Climate Change, Desertification and Drought" and issued a declaration stating that the current Chilean forestry model is responsible for the loss of agricultural land, the decrease and disappearance of underground and surface water sources, the loss of native forest, and the destruction of the way of life and culture of local communities. Directed to the government, the declaration further states:

- We condemn the fact that these decisions – which affect many territories and communities – are adopted bilaterally between the government and large forestry companies, excluding the communities that suffer from the expansion of plantations.
- We demand an end to direct and indirect subsidies for the forestry sector using resources that belong to all of the inhabitants of Chile and are not meant to favour specific economic groups. It is time for the state to stop plundering goods and resources that are public and collective and correspond to the sovereignty of the people.
- We demand the suspension of the measure to increase the resources allocated to forestry subsidies, the definitive repeal of Decree Law 701, and the redirection of these resources to support peasant agriculture and repair the damages caused, in order to foster and promote local and diversified economies.

The full text of the declaration (in Spanish) is available at:  
[http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/No\\_expansion\\_forestal.html](http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/No_expansion_forestal.html)

It is important to point out that this meeting – which was not organized by the government, but rather by the Latin American Environmental Conflicts Observatory – has been the only forum where the communities affected by monoculture tree plantations have had the opportunity to voice their position on this subject. The meeting also served as a broad-based means of coordination to continue working to demand an end to government subsidies for forestry companies and to permanently halt the establishment of large-scale pine and eucalyptus monoculture plantations.

Latin American Environmental Conflicts Observatory (OLCA),  
<http://www.olca.cl/oca/index.htm>, member of the Latin American Network Against Monoculture Tree Plantations (RECOMA).

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### **- China: Eucalyptus plantations - from Finland with conflict**

Eucalyptus plantations have become a harsh issue for Chinese farmers of the villages north of the city of Hepu in the province of Guangxi, south of China. Their collective land has been expropriated to make way for monoculture tree plantations.

Behind the move is the Finnish-Swedish forestry giant Stora Enso, that plans to lease 180,000 hectares of land for half a century to plant eucalyptus that will feed the company's pulp mill near the city of Beihai.

According to a report by Petteri Tuohinen from the Finnish publication Helsingin Sanomat, "Stora Enso is one of about 260 Finnish companies that is seeking profit from the growing Chinese market. Foreign operations is vital for Stora Enso. When the company presented its quarterly results on Thursday, CEO Jouko Karvinen said that considerable profits abroad helped cover losses made in Finland." (1)

However, the business has implied a lot of conflict. In China all land belongs to the state or to rural communities, and Stora Enso has to lease the land as it cannot own it. So, once it has the officials on its side, it is them who get the land for the eucalyptus plantations -and local authorities have been very akin to promote industrial tree plantations. Accordingly, they have tried to seize the land used by the villagers to hand it over to Stora Enso. Not without resistance, though.

Because of the vagueness of land ownership in China it is often unclear who has the right to use land. Many villagers didn't believe in the promises of prosperity of the so called "forest project" in the Hepu area. For those who lost their land, compensation was about EUR 50 a year per hectare for the expropriated land. That is meaningless for people who have been making their living growing beans, maize, fruits or bamboos with which baskets and other goods were made. These means of livelihood were gone with the land. Now the area is full of eucalyptus seedlings.

All this has led to mounting conflict from villagers whose opposition to Stora Enso's plantations has been confronted with harsh violence by local officials. Land disputes reached a peak in 2004 and several people were injured. As a last resort, villagers in

the land disputes have now turned to appeal as a last resort, although with little hope: “We have no option left than to appeal the situation. However, there is no point in expecting results from the appeal. Stora Enso is taking the rice bowl away from the farmers here”, says a village activist quoted by Helsingin Sanomat.

Even lawyer Yang Zaixin who defends the rights of the villagers was stormed and beaten by a group of men in what seems to be an intimidation to his work. Yang was quoted saying he is not sure if Stora Enso knew about the beating: “They don’t have to become directly involved in this kind of thing. Stora Enso merely pressures local officials to make sure that the company will get the land that it needs to grow its eucalyptus trees.” However, the company was aware of the lawyer and his defense of the villagers since he met with the field manager of Stora Enso and the company’s lawyer.

Land disputes are not new for Stora Enso. The same company’s Head of Sustainability Eija Pitkänen recognizes it: “Land use and land ownership are big issues. That is why there will always be conflicts. They cannot be averted”.

Friends of the Earth Finland have denounced the lack of real participation of local residents in impact assessments of forestry companies’ projects: “For instance, in Brazil, Stora Enso works only with those organisations that take a conciliatory view, and are certain to cooperate. In China, professional businesses and organisations are often under so much pressure that they do not dare bring forward any negative sides”, says Noora Ojala, Vice President of Friends of the Earth Finland. (2)

Finnish investment abroad may solve losses at home but surely also expands abroad conflicts and violence that fall on the weakest.

(1) “Chinese farmers lose land to Stora Enso tree plantations”,  
<http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Chinese+farmers+lose+land+to+Stora+Enso+tree+plantations/1135245537698>

(2) “Finnish Prime Minister wants investigation into claims of violence linked with Stora Enso activities in China”,  
<http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Stora+Enso+to+investigate+land+use+dispute+over+tree+plantations+in+China/1135245533336>.

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### **- Costa Rica: Government boosts subsidies for monoculture tree plantations**

Back in 2003, we said that “using the term reforestation for the establishment of a monoculture tree plantation has historically conferred on this type of activity all of the positive characteristics that people rightly associate with a forest, although this is far from the actual reality” (Ambientico magazine, issue 123, December 2003, [www.una.ac.cr/ambi/Ambien-Tico/123](http://www.una.ac.cr/ambi/Ambien-Tico/123)). We added that “in general, tree plantations are used to grow a single species or, at most, a small number of species of trees, always using specimens of the same age and never achieving the degree of biodiversity or the complex interrelations found in a forest.” For his part, Edwin Alpizar noted that “plantations, in comparison with forests, contribute very little to the environment,” and

he further described the impacts of plantations in terms of loss of biodiversity and damage to natural water systems.

In spite of all this, and in spite of the fact that monoculture tree plantations have failed to become self-financing, the Costa Rican government has subsidized them and continues to provide them with subsidies, directly and indirectly, camouflaged under the euphemism of “payment for environmental services”. Between 2006 and 2007, the state subsidy for the establishment of monoculture tree plantations was raised from USD 500 per hectare to USD 810 per hectare.

The justification given at the time for this increase was that the total amount allocated would be disbursed over a longer period of time – which was in turn increased from five years to ten years – in order to ensure the long-term growth of the plantations.

Nevertheless, in 2008, with no explanation whatsoever, the period for the disbursement of these funds was reduced to five years once again. And this year, the logging industry, backed by one of its long-time leaders – current Environment Minister Jorge Rodríguez – gave itself another hefty raise. Under Executive Decree No. 35159-MINAET (Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Telecommunications), passed in April 2009, the subsidy for monoculture tree plantations was increased yet again, with no explanation, from USD 810 to USD 960 per hectare – in other words, a 20% increase.

At the same time, this constitutes an indirect subsidy for big exporters of fresh fruit – pineapples and bananas – since over 80% of the wood harvested on tree plantations is currently used to make wooden pallets used to export fruit. The government finances wood production so that the companies that reap juicy profits from fruit exports can count on cheap wood for their pallets.

For their part, monoculture pineapple and banana plantations cause severe impacts of their own, which have been widely documented in the mainstream media over recent years: the sterilization and poisoning of hundreds of workers, contamination of rural waterways, erosion and deforestation.

There are currently over 26 pineapple-growing companies under investigation for environmental destruction, according to a report carried out in March 2009 in the community of Milano, in the province of Limón (1). The report also denounces the deforestation caused by the expansion of pineapple monocultures, leading to the disappearance of protected species like cedar, andiroba and sparrowhawks, as well as the selective cutting of tree species like bay laurel to prevent the “contamination” of pineapples for export, which would be prohibited in Europe for failing to meet health or plant health standards.

With regard to the clearing of forests, one of the community members interviewed gave the following testimony: “I was a security guard for the company and I saw everything they did to the forest. Before, everything was covered by a thick forest cover. The company started to cut down trees at night, trees that were made of very good wood, and they buried them because it was prohibited by the government to cut them down.” He added: “The company has left us with nothing. The birds and other

animals went away too after the forests disappeared.”

What is particularly sad is that this whole plantation scheme is being promoted through the “Plant a Tree!” publicity campaign, which among other things, counts the trees planted by large corporations as “reforestation”, even though most of them are cut down after only eight years to make wooden pallets. Last year, around 80% of the trees reported by this campaign were alien species planted on large monoculture plantations subsidized by the government.

The country needs wood, of course, but it also needs forests to confront climate change. There are numerous proposals for producing wood through more socially just and environmentally sound methods, some of which can be seen by visiting [www.coecoceiba.org](http://www.coecoceiba.org)

By Javier Baltodano, COECOCEIBA-Friends of the Earth, Costa Rica, email: [licania@racsa.co.cr](mailto:licania@racsa.co.cr)

(1) “Informe de la misión de verificación sobre los impactos de los monocultivos de piña” (Report of the fact-finding mission on the impacts of pineapple monocultures), community of Milano, province of Limón, Costa Rica, 29 March 2009. The full report is available in Spanish at: [http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/CostaRica/Informe\\_monocultivo\\_pina.pdf](http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/CostaRica/Informe_monocultivo_pina.pdf).

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### **- Guatemala: Social and environmental impacts of oil palm plantations**

In comparison, Guatemala is a relatively small country but it is very rich in biodiversity. The country is located in the Meso-American\* region, the centre of origin of traditional maize and bean landraces, as well as of various species of pumpkins among others.

The fact of being located between two big oceans, the differences in altitude ranging from sea level to an altitude of 4,220 metres at the summit of the Tajumulco volcano and being part of a great continental bridge has generated great biological wealth resulting in a wide variety of ecosystems and animal and plant species, many of them used by local communities for their subsistence.

A major part of this natural wealth has quickly been lost due to changes in land use and poor land management influenced by economic and political interests. The agro-industrial model of monoculture plantations and products that are not aimed at feeding the population but at exports has left its mark on nature and on the human communities, causing serious negative environmental and social impacts.

The large scale agro-export and monoculture model which had previously been mainly concentrated in the southern coastal region has now moved to Departments in the north of the country where, in addition to sugar cane plantations, oil palm plantations are to be found. The expansion of oil palm plantation companies is taking place in a context of evictions and forced purchase of land from impoverished communities that have to migrate to other locations.



The areas most affected by monoculture oil palm plantations are: the Izabal region, specifically near the Wildlife Refuge of Bocas del Polochic, which is also a Ramsar site, and the North Transversal Strip region in Ixcán and the south of Petén.

According to the National Statistics Institute, in 2003, 49 farms were devoted to oil palm production, covering a total area of 31,185 hectares and producing over seven million quintals, mainly used in the preparation of essential oils and waxes for the food and soap industry.

The 2007 farm survey established that the number of farms dedicated to this product had increased to 1,049 for that year and that the area under cultivation with oil palm had spread to 65,340 hectares, implying that it had doubled over the past 4 years. Figures in an Action Aid report dated June 2008 show an estimated total of 83,385 hectares under plantation or in the process of plantation with oil palm for the production of biodiesel.

In spite of human rights violations and the ecological damage caused by oil palm plantations, the issue has not yet been placed on the national public agenda or debate in Guatemala. Negative impacts presently being generated are: loss of land for agriculture, forced land purchase, displacement and forced migration towards protected areas, where these communities are pinpointed as “invaders” and accused of destroying the natural heritage. The causes and the origin of this action are never mentioned. The abusive use of water sources and competition over water between the vast tracts of oil palm and sugar cane and the rural communities are additional impacts.

In many places, forests and natural ecosystems have already been destroyed for the production of oils and sugar, transforming them into monoculture plantations. This causes considerable negative repercussions on nature, ecosystem connectivity and on people.

With agro-industrial activities and plantations our country loses much more than biodiversity. It loses the possibility of providing fairer and more decent living conditions to present and future generations.

By Carlos Salvatierra, SAVIA / Guatemala, e-mail: [salvatierraleal@gmail.com](mailto:salvatierraleal@gmail.com), with information quoted and contained in Action Aid’s document “Las Plantaciones para Agrocombustibles y la pérdida de tierras para la producción de alimentos en Guatemala” (Plantations for Agrofuels and the loss of land for food production in Guatemala).

\*Includes Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama.

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**- New video online on timber plantations in Southern Africa**

The Southern African organization GeaSphere has produced the online video "Earth Matters" which can be viewed (in two parts) at [http://www.wrm.org.uy/Videos/Earth\\_Matters.html](http://www.wrm.org.uy/Videos/Earth_Matters.html)

In this video, Philip Owen of GeaSphere describes the social and environmental impacts of high impact, fast rotation timber plantations in Southern Africa. Philip's explanations, coupled with other testimonies and impressive images of alien tree monocultures –as well as natural grassland and forest ecosystems- provide a clear picture on the disaster that these plantations have meant for local people and the native environment. The video describes water depletion, biodiversity loss and soil erosion caused by plantations as well as their incapacity for providing employment opportunities to local populations. Philip highlights that –in spite of all those impacts- 80% of these plantations are FSC certified as "responsibly managed forests", thus making the FSC seal meaningless.

The video also explains that most of these plantations are aimed at exporting pulp for feeding overconsumption of paper and paper products in countries of the North. This means the installation of pulp mills to convert the plantations' wood into pulp for export and the pollution resulting from these pulp mills that affect the local environment.

We encourage you to see and share this excellent video, particularly with people that are still unaware about the impacts of industrial tree monocultures.

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