
Guatemala: sugarcane's bitter consequences

In our country, one of the crops that has caused the most negative impacts from its start to the present day is sugarcane. The sugarcane plantations are located in the Pacific Plains, a rich area with fertile soils of volcanic origin and abundant water from rainfall and the rivers born in the volcanic chain. These conditions were perfect for the development of this crop and the expansion of sugar mills. Today Guatemala is the fifth largest exporter of sugar in the world and second in production in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Presently, 14 sugar mills are in operation and in 2007 sugarcane plantations covered 216,000 hectares, approximately the same size as the Department of Guatemala (225,300 hectares) an appreciable area considering the size of our country (108,889 km²).

One of the most serious problems of monoculture sugarcane plantations is the total destruction of the ecosystems where they are located. In Guatemala this has led to the disappearance of vast areas of forest.

Added to the above is the exaggerated use of water which affects the human communities and causes direct and indirect negative impacts on terrestrial and coastal marine ecosystems. Burning sugarcane contaminates the environment, affects the health of neighbouring communities and releases CO₂, one of the greenhouse gases. The burning of these plantations, year after year contributes to increasing global warming. During the harvest, the sugar mills change the course of rivers towards their plantations, leaving the communities without water; while at the same time also dumping their contaminated waste in them.

The canals and ditches, opened up for irrigation in the plantations, carry the water inland and cause flooding during the rainy season, placing many villages at risk. To this is added the contamination caused by the excessive use of agrochemicals, pesticides and chemical ripeners that are transported by the rivers towards coastal marine ecosystems such as mangroves.

One of the problems encountered by the sugar industry is the amount of land available to expand its plantations. According to statements made in 2007 by Armando Boesche, manager of the Guatemalan Sugar Growers Association (Asazgua - Asociación de Azucareros de Guatemala) **“Now there is no land available because we have reached the limit.”** This situation has become a threat to ecosystems and local inhabitants and is sensitive in a country where land disputes have led to wars, disappearances and death.

A clear example of the lack of land was the transfer in 2006 of the Guadalupe sugar mill to the Polochic River valley in Izabal near the wildlife refuge and Ramsar Site of Bocas del Polochic. This situation directly and indirectly threatens the wetlands and wildlife due to the changing of river courses and the use of agrochemicals that are transported to this body of water by rain and runoff, risking stepping up the growth of *Hydrilla verticillata*, an invasive plant that has been established in this location for several years now.

However, in the South the sugarcane plantations do not seem to have reached “the limit,” as they continue to expand, with the felling of the last trees and riparian forests that protected the river courses. They have had negative impacts on endangered species such as the Yellow-necked Parrot, in serious danger of extinction. The sugarcane frontier has reached the mangrove shores and localities such as Iztapa and Hawai, two areas that still conserve this endangered ecosystem. The plantations reach their borders, causing isolation and pressure.

No assessment has yet been made in Guatemala of the accumulative negative impacts of these monoculture plantations that affect both the neighbouring communities and local ecosystems. In the meanwhile, the people continue to sweeten drinks and food, oblivious of the bitter impacts of this monoculture on nature and on people.

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