
Women speak out about the water taken away from them

Together with the arrival of large-scale monoculture tree plantations is the departure of water. This affects the whole village community, but for women, the effects are particularly differentiated. They tell us about with their own words.

In Brazil the Mata Atlântica - an ecosystem which contained some of the planet's greatest biological diversity - has given way to a uniform and sad landscape of large-scale monoculture eucalyptus plantations. (1) "... it seems as if the climate changed, inside the village. It changed because even the rain... these are the changes that the eucalyptus brought. The rivers used to have a strong current, and now there's just a trickle of water left. How are we going to be able to plant? There are times when you have to be watering the garden all the time, because the soil is dry and cracked. The problem today is that to have healthy food you have to plant and spread manure. ...” (Cláudia, Tupinikim and Guaraní Indigenous Women's Commission, Tupinikim village of Pau-Brasil)

“I always tell about what my mother told me: that there used to be lots of hunting, lots of fish. Now the São Domingos river has no more water, and there are no more animals to hunt. Just armadillos and capybaras... The fish are gone forever, too. If you want fish, you have to buy it in the city, because it's all gone. My kids don't even know what it is.” (Domingas, Quilombola community of São Domingos).

In the municipality of Aracruz alone, 430 km² of native tropical rainforest were deforested to make way for eucalyptus plantations. Rivers that played an essential part in the lives of indigenous peoples like the Guaxindiba and Sahy and flowed past the village of Pau-Brasil practically disappeared. “It was so wonderful to have the river open to us. We washed clothes, we collected water for drinking, for cooking... You could catch fish, you could scoop them up with a sieve. All those women... there would be so many there together! It was the place to wash clothes. You would finish washing clothes, then take a swim and leave, you know?” (Maridéia, Tupinikim village of Pau- Brasil)

This drama has also affected the region where the Quilombola communities live. “Today the river is polluted. We don't use the water to drink, we don't use the water to bathe, we don't use the water to wash clothes, we don't use it for anything, you know? That means that the difference is a big difference, because we used to have our good river, our river was clean, the water was like glass, you could look into it and see your own shadow, you could see the little fish swimming along the bottom, and today, you can't see anything ...” (Nilza, Indigenous Women's Commission, Tupinikim village of Comboios)

“[...] Our concern was the lack of river water, and now it's much worse. It's just like you said, bathing, washing clothes, having water in the house. ... And when there was a river here, the women would grab their bundles of clothes... and it was like a party on the riverbank, all of them washing clothes. It was mostly on Saturdays, and for those who had time, during the week. It was one less chore, because there was all of that water in the river, and everything was easier. [...] When we had to get water from the well, and go down the slope to where the well is today... So this isn't really something men worry about, it's more of a women's concern, and when there's no water in the

tanks or there's a problem with the pump, then men aren't going to pick up a pail... there are very few men who will pick up a pail and go down the slope, right? And when there was only a little bit of water, people started changing. But it's really a woman's concern, right? To go down and get water from the well to have water in the house. Until... what I mean is, when there was a river, it was less of a concern, because at least for washing clothes, you had a way to solve the problem. The problems got worse when this whole process started, when the eucalyptus came and started sucking all the water from the river until it reached the point that it's reached today." (Maria Helena, Tupinikim village of Pau-Brasil).

"We washed a lot of clothes together. That was the place. When the women laid the clothes out in the sun to dry, they would all get to talking. People leave clothes to soak in powdered detergent, right? But not them. The bleach they used there was papaya leaves, right? (laughter) And they would lay out... on those big grass fields on the riverbank, they grew those plants and they got the sheets so white, the clothes so white, it really bleached them. Sometimes some of that bit of water would splash onto something and it would bleach it, it really would." (ENI, Quilombola community of São Domingos).

In Ecuador, in the mangrove area, the typical "Concheras"* traditionally obtained their livelihood and that of their families from the artisanal gathering of shrimps that nest in the wetlands among the roots of mangroves. Now both the mangroves and the "Concheras" have suffered a ferocious devastation in the hands of industrial shrimp farming.

"Our lives have been completely destroyed with the arrival of the shrimp farms. They have even taken our dignity away. We can no longer fish; we can no longer gather cockles because they prevent us from entering the places where we always worked. They have even taken over the water, sometimes they give us a little to cook, but that is when they have some left over." (An inhabitant of Puerto Hondo, in Puna Island, Province of Guayas) (2)

In the Ecuadorian sierra – the Paramos – the planting of pine-trees started in the eighties, promoted by institutions such as the Ecuadorian Populorum Progressio Fund, telling the communities how and where to plant the trees. The negative impacts make themselves felt, particularly among the women, as can be seen from the following testimonials: (3)

"Now we have no water and the rivers are dry, we have no vegetable plot, we don't plant onions or anything. Summer is very hard, the plants, the animals die; the fresh water holes have dried up. The land is no longer fertile, it no longer produces anything." (A woman from Bolivar Simiátug)

"Before we used to use this water to wash with, now we can no longer do so and have to use drinking water." (A woman from Tungurahua).

"For example, we are obliged to prepare food, to bath the children. The sacrifice is to carry water for two or three hours in bottles, that is the way it is done. We women have to give the animals water at mid-day and also in the evening. We have to take the cow looking for water because there is none in the watering hole and the big river is sometimes 40 – 50 minutes away. We women call in the cows. When we prepare food we have to carry the water. There we go, taking the kids. Looking for water we find it where native plants grew or if not we dig deeply with the hoe where there are no pines growing."

"In the pine plantations, all the native plants died off and as nothing will grow everything dried up in there and fires started." (A woman from Guaranda).

The lack of water caused by the pine plantations has also spread to agricultural areas.

“Before we used to plant short cycle crops, blackberries and other types of plants, but we have had to change our crops. We have also had to change our animals, and now we only have guinea-pigs.”
(A woman from Tungurahua)

“This mainly affects our economy: we no longer produce; now we have to buy everything. Many women have left to work in the city, as maids or seamstresses. Before our grandmothers used to stay at home, the children stayed with the older people.” (A woman from Tungurahua).

These women are persevering and flow like the water that has been taken away from them. Their voices must be listened to and validated because they are speaking of truths that have the weight and simplicity of life itself.

(1) Excerpted from “*Women and Eucalyptus*” – *Stories of life and resistance*, Gilsa Helena Barcillos and Simone Batista Ferreira

(2) Testimonial provided by Marianeli Torres, C-CONDEM, e-mail: marianeli@ccondem.org.ec

(3) Testimonials gathered during on-going research entrusted by WRM.

*Translator’s note: “Concheras” women cockle-gatherers in Ecuador