
Argentina: A respite in the commercial assault against forests

On 26 November 2004, the Province of Santa Fe legislature adopted an emergency environmental law placing an absolute moratorium on land clearing, logging, deforestation, burning or destruction of woodland and native forests for a period of 180 days, which can be extended a further 180 days by the executive.

Furthermore, on 17 December, the Civil and Trade Court No. 6 of the Chaco Province, presided by Dr. Iride Isabel Maria Grillo, ruled favourably in an action for the protection of a collective right guaranteed by the Constitution, lodged by the indigenous communities in defence of their territories. In this respect, she declared the forest law reform permitting unlimited logging to be unconstitutional, based on the violation of the duty to consult with the indigenous communities and on the violation of environmental obligations by the Chaco State. In view of the effects caused by this violation, she ordered that an evaluation be made of the damage done to the Chaco forest together with an assessment of the environmental and social impact if such action were to persist.

In this ruling she quoted, among the justifications, part of the document prepared by the Foro del Buen Ayre, a coalition of NGOs that was present at the 10th Conference of the Parties (COP 10) to the Convention on Climatic Change held recently in Buenos Aires. This document demanded that all forest clearing should be halted, maintaining that “both for reasons of biodiversity protection and for the multiple environmental services that they offer, in addition to climatic change mitigation, we must protect the last forests remaining in Argentina.”

In this document, the Foro del Buen Ayre demands that the Argentine National State act to protect the communities and indigenous peoples who are being stripped of their lands and whose natural reserves are put up for bids for private benefit. It states: “The National State cannot continue to be absent from this process of devastation of our forests.”

The member organizations of the Foro del Buen Ayre maintain in this document that “Land planning is necessary, ensuring that criteria of sustainability are foremost in the preservation of native forests and their biodiversity and in the use of land. The State must engage itself with an active and responsible policy and not leave forest preservation to the unequal correlation of forces that exists among the business community, vulnerable peasant communities and provincial governments.”

The causes of one of the greatest climatic catastrophes of the twenty-first century faced by Argentina between March and April 2003 were identified. The Province of Santa Fe suffered one of the worst floods ever recorded: in 10 days the rainfall amounted to 400 mm, affecting 220,000 hectares, causing prejudice to the population and to the main economic activities in the area. The balance of the catastrophe was 130,000 victims, 30 dead, 28,000 homes damaged and losses amounting to over 1,500 million dollars.

One of the factors that went to make the floods turn into a real tragedy was the continued loss over

the past decades of forest cover in river basins, such as that of the Salado river (see WRM Bulletin No. 85). This deforestation is mainly caused by the expansion of agriculture. Since 1999, the unceasing work of the lumberjacks in the provinces of Santiago del Estero, Chaco, Salta, Tucuman, Cordoba, Santa Fe and Entre Rios has enabled soybean crops to increase by over 2,000,000 hectares. In one of the most affected regions, the Chaco, it is estimated that if this practice were to continue, by 2010 some 4,300,000 hectares will have been cleared of trees.

In turn, this deforestation is a considerable contribution to the release of carbon emissions and therefore, to global warming. In a recent paper by the Forest Office of the Secretariat for the Environment and Sustainable Development of the Argentine Nation, an assessment was made of releases of gases from deforestation in the various forest environments. The data presented point out that presently Argentina possesses a great source of released gases arising from deforestation in the Northeast of the country, Parque Chaqueño and the Yungas forest.

In a discouraging situation in which native forests now occupy a mere 14 per cent of the national territory – while in 1914 they covered 39 per cent of the area – local organizations consider both resolutions to be positive, giving a respite from the assaults by commercial interests that devastate life itself.

It is now a matter of benefiting from this respite to work socially in visualizing productive models that bridge the separation between production and nature and that make it possible to unearth local knowledge and its ways of relating to the world, that certainly has much to contribute to achieve reciprocal system integration.

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