
Argentina: Mbya Guarani communities threatened by a logging company

The Yaboti forest, 300 km to the east of Posadas in the Province of Misiones, was designated as a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1995. In addition to its importance for biodiversity, it is the only refuge and means of subsistence of two communities of the Mbya Guarani ethnic group (Tekoa Yma and Tekoa Kapi'i Yvate), peoples who only recently got in touch with the outside world and who are now threatened by the interests of the Mocona Forestal S.A. company.

The Mbya Guarani have had their abode in the Misiones forest for over 1,500 years. Both communities threatened by the logging company live and obtain their food, medicines and materials from a territory covering 6,500 hectares, coinciding with plots 7 and 8 of the Reserve, in private hands. The company offered the communities 30 hectares to be satisfied with, but the Guarani communities rejected the idea that this land had an owner and that they were being offered 30 hectares of communal lands where their ancestors had lived and where they now live, on loan from their children. Later the offer was increased to cover 200 hectares. The company continues not wanting to understand the essence of Guarani culture.

The Foundation for Environmental Defence (Fundación para la Defensa del Ambiente – FUNAM) which works with these communities complained that the Mocona Forestal S.A. company is destroying part of the Yaboti Reserve and has recently cut down over one hundred very large trees.

The President of FUNAM, the biologist Raul Montenegro, denounced that the company “has the authorizations given by the Misiones Ministry of Environment on the basis of obsolete standards,” adding that these standards “in addition to being obsolete, ignore the way the forest functions. Thus they benefit logging companies and damage the health of indigenous communities. It is unacceptable that the Yaboti Biosphere Reserve is being so mismanaged and that the Government of Misiones should ignore the ancestral needs of the Guarani culture.”

“If Resolution 020/94 – the Forest Management Plan, applied by the Misiones Ministry of Environment – is not abolished and the Ministry continues to authorize the logging of trees, essential for the survival of the Mbya and the forest, the category given to the Yaboti Biosphere Reserve is at a risk. We cannot allow this silent genocide to continue with impunity,” stated Mr. Montenegro in a formal complaint lodged with UNESCO in Paris.

Presently the two communities together with ENDEPA (the National Aboriginal Pastoral Team), have filed a suit at the Misiones Courts to have the Mocona Forestal S.A. company give back the lands corresponding to plot 8 to the Mbya. So far the courts have ruled in favour of the powerful company and the communities' lawyers have appealed against the ruling.

“While the court case continues, the trees are being felled and the health of the Mbya is deteriorating from lack of natural medicines and from lack of prey that no longer fall into the traps. The noise made by the chainsaws and of the trees brutally falling has driven away the native fauna,” stated Raul Montenegro.

Artemio Benítez, the chief of the Tekoa Yma community added “They do not need to threaten us to make us leave this place. They know that if they take away the forest, we will go, and that is what they are doing.”

Natalino Benitez, another member of the same community pointed out that “The white people have already entered our forest and have taken all our medicines, medicines that should cure us. If they take every thing away, we now have no medicines and we do not know how we are going to live any more. Where are we going to find the medicines that should be used by our sons and our daughters and that are now lacking?” he asked.

According to information provided by the National Aboriginal Pastoral Team, this ethnic group uses over 150 species of medicinal plants, many of which are trees that the company remorselessly logs in front of children and adults, who see with horror how their world is collapsing.

For this reason, FUNAM is demanding that the ethnic groups be given back plots 7 and 8 of the Reserve. “Until this is done, the Misiones Ministry of Environment must prohibit the Mocona Forestal S.A. company from continuing to log trees in Plot 8,” urged Raul Montenegro.

Montenegro stated that this dispossession is “a silent genocide,” and added that traditional genocide “smells of powder and massacre, but in Misiones it is being achieved without bloodshed. Guns have been replaced by chainsaws. The logging companies fell trees and on doing so, leave the Mbya without their roof and without their medicines, exposing them to more diseases and more death.”

Article based on information from: “Reserva de la Biosfera de Yabotí en Misiones”, FUNAM, e-mail: funam@funam.org.ar , <http://www.funam.org.ar> ; “Argentina: Misiones: pelagra la subsistencia de una etnia aborígen desconocida”, FUNAM, <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/article/articleview/5278/1/15/> ; “La empresa Moconá Forestal S.A. arrincona a varias comunidades indígenas para explotar sus bosques”, <http://www.setemextremadura.pangea.org/campana4.htm>