
Chile: Forests for people or monoculture plantations for companies

Lying to the population is one of the tools most commonly used by governments and forestry companies all over the world to impose the model of large-scale monoculture tree plantations. Chile has wide experience in this type of deception. However, increasingly people are becoming organized to struggle against the unjust government policy which favours the companies and to defend the true Chilean forests.

For the third time now and supported by the Timber Corporation, the deceitful campaign "Forests for Chile" has been launched. This campaign appears on television and in the mass media, showing the importance and value of forests, but with pictures showing alien radiata pine plantations. The government also continues to give its support to this deceit. In a local newspaper, with reference to this advertising campaign, one may read "The Ministry of Agriculture considers that this initiative represents an interesting opportunity to highlight one of Chile's most relevant environmental and productive resources, as are forests and their related activities. Additionally, with this initiative, Chilean society is being invited to get to know and to value our forests, to make them part of our daily lives and our action as a society."

The article goes on to state that "due to their wide distribution throughout a considerable part of our geography, to the rich diversity of forest types and species, to the fact that they host a considerable part of our biodiversity and that they are a source of water and soil conservation as well as spaces for recreation and tourism, forests are a substantive part of our social and economic reality."

Reading these first two paragraphs, anyone could believe that this is a worthy initiative, if it were not for the fact that what is really being promoted is monoculture pine tree plantations, as from then on, the article continues to refer to forests and plantations without differentiating which are the ones that provide the benefits referred to earlier on.

This confusion does not arise at the time of deciding who should be supported. As analysed in detail in our Bulletin No. 70, plantations of alien tree species continue to be subsidised, while the government is still considering what type of support should be given to forests.

Motivated by the injustice of this situation, on 26 June 2003, some 450 representatives of indigenous communities and small forest landowners from the Ninth and Tenth Regions met in the city of Temuco at the First National Meeting of Small Forest Landowners of Chile, with the aim of sharing needs and proposals to promote forest conservation and sustainable management and to inform the country of the situation. A good starting point for what they have called Social Movement for the Chilean Forests.

As a result of this meeting, a declaration was prepared which we have published in our web page at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/gente.html> (available only in Spanish). We have extracted some of the basic ideas of the communities' feelings, regarding forests and the support they are demanding from the authorities:

The native forest in the south of Chile is an economic, cultural and biological heritage of tremendous value, both for the country and for the world. However, small forest landowners, some 90 thousand families in the Ninth region alone, are presently suffering from a very deteriorated economic situation and have no access to public programmes or resources to conserve their forests, which cover over 1.5 million hectares.

This contradiction is mainly due to the lack of policies and strategies supporting and promoting indigenous and peasant economies, or forest conservation and sustainable management, and to the absence of a Native Forest Law in the country, a law that has been waiting for 12 years now to be adopted. This is also a consequence of economic policies giving priority to the exploitation of natural resources and large scale private investment geared to export. Added to this, are the lack of understanding and sensitivity regarding the Mapuche, Huilliche and peasant peoples, turning them into an underprivileged sector, weakly integrated to the national economy.

Small forest landowner organizations are demanding that the Native Forest Law be promoted in Chile and propose giving priority to a subsidy for small forest landowners and to the promotion to the payment of compensation by transnational forestry companies to the small landowners, as a way of repairing the effects of forest substitution.

While opposing subsidies granted to companies or large landowners, they also demand the promotion and practice of appropriate management of the specific situation of forests, culture and forms of traditional management and that an opportunity be given to peasants and Mapuche and Huilliche communities to conserve their forests. Finally, they demand the implementation of educational activities at all levels in order to achieve respect for the values and contributions of the forest in all its meanings, for the benefit of people.

Faced by these demands, the government will have to decide between continuing to encourage the monoculture tree plantation model, promoted during the Pinochet dictatorship (for the almost exclusive benefit of large economic groups) or to support indigenous and peasant communities in sustainable forest management. An essential step in this respect is the acknowledgement that plantations are not forests. When this happens, the slogan "Forests for Chile" will start to have some meaning.

Article based on information from the Declaration "Bosques Nativos para la Gente" sent by Rodrigo Catalán from the "Fondo Bosque Templado", e-mail: fondobt@telsur.cl; Angélica Hernández M., Agenda Regional de la Araucanía (Grupo AGRA), e-mail: agendaregional@terra.cl; El Mercurio, 22 June 2003, http://www.agricultura.gob.cl/opinion_subsec.php?cod_opinion=666