
Costa Rica: The slow death of large-scale monoculture eucalyptus plantations

At the beginning of the nineties, the introduction and cultivation of eucalyptus, a species originating in Australia, was promoted as a major timber business. However, at the end of the decade, this model of large scale tree monoculture has finished by causing big economic losses to the State and to a large number of farmers.

The following report by Tierramerica reaffirms our position that alien species cannot be introduced on a large scale without a prior study on how they will react in an environment that is foreign to their nature and above all, on what environmental and social impacts they may cause, when all these efforts and incentives could have been devoted to investigate and promote the sustainable use of native species.

"According to the Ministry of Environment and Energy, between 3,800 and 4,000 hectares planted with eucalyptus have been lost, a species alien to tropical biodiversity, that has ruined many families." "Nature is wise and does not make mistakes," were the words of Luis Quiros, an engineer and specialist from the Ministry. "We cannot force species from other latitudes to adapt to our conditions," he added.

Quiros, the head of the San Jose sub-region, commented that Latin America has suffered from a series of fashions over the past few decades, disseminated by international specialists. "Many organisations come along and recommend what we should sow, on the basis of what has been successful in the countries of the North, but do not take into account the pests and local conditions in the tropics," he affirmed.

The eucalyptus, a fast-growing tree with a great capacity to absorb water, was promoted as the new forestry species at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties, to take the pressure off deforestation of native forests.

The State established economic incentives for owners of farms planting eucalyptus. The purpose was to use its wood to make furniture and laminated panelling.

Everything went well over the first three years, but during the fourth year the trees stopped growing and started suffering from a disease that the local inhabitants call "slow death." "We dedicated a lot of work to the project, but all is lost" the 47 year old farmer Ronald Rodriguez told Tierramerica. He had planted 100 hectares of trees in 1990.

Scientists discovered that the soils were not appropriate for eucalyptus, given that the roots of this species cannot penetrate certain depths because of the clayey nature of certain plots. This has favoured the appearance of fungus and later termites, which little by little did away internally with the bark of the trees, and therefore these dried up.

"In all, with what the State gave me and with what I invested, I believe that only in my case I lost

close on 500 thousand dollars. There were families that were left very badly off as they thought that eucalyptus would be their life project," added Rodriguez.

Now, scientists, producers and environmentalists coincide in the moral of the eucalyptus: research and prior experience is required before massively promoting an alien species. "Sufficient research is required before embarking producers and peasants in these projects, as in the end they are the ones that most suffer," Alexander Bonilla, a geographer and environmentalist, stated to Tierramerica.

Other specialists state that it is necessary to make better use of local species, as otherwise one falls into a sort of "ecological inferiority complex" (preferring foreign over native species) through the promotion of alien species without prior research.

Article based on information from: "Fracasa cultivo masivo de eucalipto", Néfer Muñoz, Tierramérica, Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo - Costa Rica, <http://www.tierramerica.org/2002/1021/acentos2.shtml>