
Paraguay: Civil society in defence of the Concepcion forests

Paraguay covers an area of 406,752 km². The Paraguay river divides the country into two well differentiated bio-regions: the Eastern region and the Western region or Chaco. Both regions have a wide diversity of culture and ecosystems.

Due to its greater population density and the constant expansion of the agricultural frontier, the Eastern region is suffering heavy pressure on its ecosystems. In this region, only 0.6% of the area is under some category of protection.

The Eastern region has lost most of its forest cover over the past 40 years. In 1945 it had almost 9 million hectares of forest, corresponding to 55% of the total area of the region. However, in 1991 this forest cover had been reduced to 15%.

The approximate mean rate of deforestation between 1985 and 1991 was 290,000 ha/year, one of the highest in the world. In some zones of the Eastern region, such as the Department of Concepcion, the greatest rates of deforestation are those recorded over the past 10 years.

Deforestation in the Department of Concepcion, as in the rest of the country, is promoted by Brazilian logging companies with sawmills in the frontier zone. The wood is superficially processed in Paraguay and then sent to Brazil, where it is "nationalised" and sold on international markets as wood from Brazilian forests.

The number of sawmills had an astounding increase in the Department (from 8 sawmills, the number has risen to 50, most of which do not comply with legal regulations), adding to the high corruption in institutions like the National Forestry Service (this body is responsible for monitoring and regulating the Forestry Sector), which allows depredation of vast areas of native forest and authorises land management plans in breach of essential civil society participation and information mechanisms established in the Environmental Impact Law 294/93.

Civil society in Concepcion, alarmed by these facts, have organised themselves to struggle against this situation, setting up the Multi-sectoral Commission for the Defence of the Natural Resources of Concepcion. This Commission gathers the association of carpenters and ebanists, students, teachers, trades-people, and small forest landowners. All of them, with the support of the local authorities, promoted the promulgation of a Departmental Ordinance, prohibiting logging of various forest species in the forests of the region, such as trebol (*Amburana cearensis*), incense (*Myrcarpus frondosus*) and lapacho (*Tabebuia heptaphylla*). These three species have the greatest economic value and therefore are the most threatened.

This regulation has come under attacks from the large landowners (mainly cattle ranchers), the owners of sawmills and even the central government itself, alluding to incompatibility between the Departmental Ordinance and the national Forestry Law. As a result, the measure was declared illegal by the government.

The result is that deforestation continues at alarming rates in the whole region, with the complicity of the National Forestry Service authorities. Civil society in Concepcion continues to take new measures, including capacity-building, information and resistance to halt a process that will damage many and benefit very few.

By María José López, Bosques Sobrevivencia/ FoE Paraguay, e-mail:
bosques@sobrevivencia.org.py

top