
Chile: Poverty and wealth generated by plantation forestry companies

The Chilean forestry model, based on the promotion of large-scale monocultures of pine trees and eucalyptus for export, has been implemented at the expense of the environment and of the local peoples. In spite of this fact, both the State and the forestry companies continue to hide the truth and insist that they are “planting forests” and contributing to the country’s development.

A major part of these plantations were implemented on Mapuche territory during the Pinochet dictatorship and this explains the continuous struggle of these indigenous peoples against the forestry companies, in an endeavour to regain their encroached-on territory. At the same time, the plantations were carried out at the expense of the region’s biodiverse native forests, with the consequent serious impact on the resources of the Mapuche people (water, soil, flora, fauna) and on their culture and traditional use of resources.

A recently published paper (“Forestry Invasion and Mapuche Ethnocide” by Alfredo Seguel) recounts (in Spanish) the Mapuche resistance and provides abundant information on the subject. We have extracted the following information from the paper, faithfully showing up the so-often repeated lie regarding the supposed benefits contributed by the plantation sector to Chile and its people.

“Among all the varied advertising used by the companies themselves and the Chilean State to justify forestry activities, insistence is placed on 'the contribution to the growth and development of the country,' 'the improvement in the quality of life of the localities,' 'the contribution to the struggle against unemployment and poverty.' However, in the localities having a considerable Mapuche population, mainly between the VIII and IX regions, this has not be shown. On the contrary, these are the places where the highest levels of extreme poverty, poverty and unemployment are focalised. The villages in the centre of forestry activities are practically ghost villages and there has been a notorious increase in Mapuche emigration. Forestry expansion has simply ended in perpetuating local poverty and increasing Mapuche impoverishment. So, what is the local contribution made by the forestry companies?

In communes such as Tirúa, Galvarino, Ercilla, Cañete, Carahue, among others, where there is a high percentage of Mapuche population, where there has been a considerable increase in forestry invasion, the figures are eloquent. Only as an example, considering the CASEN survey made by the Ministry of Planning for the year 2000, the following catastrophic situation is forecast” (summarised from the author’s table):

In the Province of Arauco, the level of poverty in the communes is as follows: Lebu: total number of poor people: 41.7% (14.7% in extreme poverty), Cañete: 37.1% (15.2% in extreme poverty), Tiruá: 30.3% (11.0% in extreme poverty).

In the Province of Malleco, the situation is as follows: Collipulli: 37.2% (11% in extreme poverty), Ercilla: 52.9% (22.5% in extreme poverty), Lumaco: 38.3% (20.5% in extreme poverty), Los Sauces: 48.5% (18.5% in extreme poverty), Traiguen: 41.6% (18.6% in extreme poverty).

In the province of Cautín, the results are as follows: Carahue: 41.4% (18.3% in extreme poverty), Loncoche: 34.6% (9.1% in extreme poverty), Galvarino: 46.3% (22.8% in extreme poverty).

The above clearly shows the lie involved in referring to the forestry sector as generating employment. However, it is a great generator of wealth...for the enormous companies in the sector. According to the author of the work we have quoted:

“The economic power of the green empire, at the expense of the historic Mapuche territory, is mainly concentrated by two important groups: the Matte group through the CMPC company, a forestry consortium; and the Angelini group (Anacleto Angelini), who controls the Bosques Arauco S.A. forestry company. These are family groups who have fortunes of billions of dollars. Anacleto Angelini alone is considered to have a personal fortune of over 2,500 million dollars and furthermore controls paper-mills, an oil company, energy, shipping, financial, fishing and mining companies among others. This shows the magnitude and power that the Mapuche communities must face in the recovery of their territory.” It also shows (our addition) the need to support at all levels their just cause for the recovery of what is and has always been theirs.