
Bolivia: The defense of the Chiquitano forest continues

Since 1999, the WRM has been reporting profusely (WRM Bulletins 20, 21, 24, 28 and 50) on the dangerous situation of the last significant remaining primary dry tropical forest in the world, the Chiquitano forest, located in Bolivian territory.

This valuable ecosystem will be altered by the gas pipeline that the transnational companies Enron and Shell plan to build between the cities of San Miguel and Cuiabá (Bolivia and Brazil respectively), crossing the region with the well-know environmental impacts caused by this type of “development” project.

Bolivian environmental and social NGOs and representatives of the academic sector have denounced this situation continuously, contending with the “agreement” reached by five conservation NGOs (3 of which from the United States; later one of them dropped out) that endorsed the construction of the gas pipeline. Paradoxically, the NGOs and the oil companies have set up a “society” known as “Foundation for the Conservation of the Chiquitano Dry Forest” (FCBC) to further this 30 million US\$ “conservation” programme.

Probioma, one of the resisting NGOs, claims that it is a contradiction to “conserve” something which is being irreversibly intervened, considering the multiple risks implied by this action. The “negotiations” between “conservationists” and oil companies took place behind closed doors, without the government, the municipalities where the Chiquitano forest is located and even less, Bolivian civil society, having any knowledge of the “agreements” reached.

In these two years of tremendously inequitable struggle, the NGOs have had to face a very considerable economic power, but have shown that their moral strength is really powerful, keeping them together to resist the violation of national sovereignty involved in these negotiations behind closed doors by entities foreign to the country and the socio-cultural situation. The NGOs are decided not to allow their resources --the most valuable ones they have and the life reserve for their children-- to be disposed of, while the people live in the deepest poverty.

What is important is that gradually, more and more members of the civil population have become involved in the debate, in the struggle to defend their rights and those of the country and the issue of natural resources and their protection (in the true sense of the word) has become incorporated into the vocabulary of the ordinary inhabitant of the area. It is also of significance that these actions have the support of the National Government through the Ministry of Sustainable Development and presently, a group of parliamentarians are launching actions.

Recently, the various Civilian Committees from the Chiquitano region (in representation of civil society) have met and have been adamant in rejecting this type of violation and organisations such as the FCBC which, while attributing themselves conservationist intentions, trample on sovereignty and take their natural wealth.

