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## Argentina: Forest loss and plantations in two provinces

Coinciding with the conquest of the vast territory of Argentina by the Buenos Aires centralized government, started in the second half of the 19th century in the name of modernization, forests in different regions of the country entered a period of decline which has continued until present times. The two cases mentioned below are only examples of a process happening throughout the country.

In the Province of Santa Fé, forest cover decreased in nearly 4.6 million hectares over the last 80 years. According to a report recently issued by the Secretary of Natural Resources and Sustainable Development, the total forest area of the province now reaches only 1.3 million hectares. In 1915, the Santa Fé Forest Census revealed the existence of 5.9 million hectares of forests. Between 1915 and 1970 the deforestation rate was of 52,700 hectares a year, but it jumped to 121,500 hectares per year between 1970 and 1984. Two forestry companies were directly responsible for this state of affairs. One was the British "La Forestal", which began to operate in the region in 1880 owning nearly one third of the Province's area to exploit "quebracho" (*Schinopsis balansae*) forests. It employed local people, who had to work in near slavery conditions. In the decade of 1960, when quebracho forests declined, the company closed business and left a desert behind, both in ecological and social terms. In the decade of 1930 "Celulosa Argentina" arrived to the region. To feed its pulp and paper mills this company both exploited native forests and set up eucalyptus plantations.

The Province of Misiones is also undergoing a severe process of forest loss and substitution by plantations. At the beginning of the 20th century 90% of its area was covered by a dense subtropical forest. Nowadays there are only 1,500,000 hectares left, only one third of which is included in natural protected areas. Deforestation continues unabated. One foreign pulp and paper company alone is expected to deforest 7,000 hectares per year and no steps have been programmed to stop this destructive process. At the same time, Misiones is increasingly being covered by large-scale fast-growing pine tree plantations, and pines are invading even the few protected forests in the province.

As usual, forest loss in these two provinces has gone hand in hand with the spread of plantations. However, most foresters --supported by the FAO definition of forests-- will say that in both provinces "forest cover" has increased, simply by adding the plantation area as part of that "forest cover." Fortunately, the public is becoming increasingly aware that eucalyptus and pine monocultures are not "forests" and that in fact plantations constitute a major cause of deforestation.

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