
Ecuador: Oil palm in the devastated Garden of Eden

In Ecuador, the relaunching of oil palm cultivation has given rise to different reactions. In a long interview published by a widely read newspaper, for instance, the question was raised on whether oil palm plantation in the province of Esmeraldas would bring this poor Ecuadorian region nearer to paradise (El Universo, 11/3/2000), while at the same time other headlines stated that oil palm cultivation is destroying native forests and that thousands of hectares have been destroyed in San Lorenzo (La Hora, 18/5/2001).

Other press media, on the other hand, echoed the massive campaign carried out by the Association of Oil Palm Cultivators of Ecuador (Asociación de Palmicultores del Ecuador ANCUPA), aimed at cleaning up their image after having been blamed for the destruction of forests. In this sense, they claimed that oil palm monocultures constitute a development proposal which is subject to “environmental censorship” and put forward the question of whether oil palm cultivation was the hen that laid the golden eggs or the “bad guy” for the environment.

Salomón Gutt, manager of Palmeras de los Andes, one of the companies responsible for the most extensive destruction of primary forest in San Lorenzo, declared that “this area had been forgotten by God and the world” until they arrived. He also stressed the fact that the palm is environmentally friendly and that “in the end a new palm forest emitting lots of oxygen is obtained. There is probably no other entrepreneurial project which can equal oil palm cultivation, where man and nature are completely intertwined.”

The governmental sector also participated in the discussion. Hans Thiel, former Forestry Director and now undersecretary of the Ministry of Environment, declared that the Ministry sees the creation of alternative sources of employment by the palm companies as something positive, since the main pressures on natural forests arise from poverty, colonization and population displacements (sic) (Diario Hoy. Blanco y Negro, 6/5/2000).

Now, after several months have elapsed since the start of the accelerated implantation of these monocultures in Esmeraldas, several points of the present situation need to be highlighted:

- the process of land acquisition has resulted in the displacement of Afro-Ecuadorian population. Some of these people, fostered by palm cultivators, are now putting pressure on the territory of the Awa and Chachi indigenous communities, which have denounced the situation to the Ministry of Agriculture.
- almost 8000 hectares have already been deforested, most of them illegally, and areas within the Forest Heritage of the State has been illegally awarded.
- the companies have not submitted the necessary environmental impact studies to carry out these operations, and the sanctions and timely actions to stop deforestation have not been taken, as can be deduced from the declarations of government officials.

As a result of environmental organizations' accusations, the Environment Minister had to make an appearance in the National Congress, where he explained that eight judicial actions had been filed on account of the clearance of native forest and that seven of them had already received a verdict. The

situation of those cases would be as follows: in the case against Palmeras de los Andes, the proceedings were rendered void in the appeal, due to errors in the location of the land. Palesma was sentenced to pay a fine of 67.908 US dollars for clearing 250 hectares of secondary forest. Ecuafinca has been sanctioned with a fine of 10 minimum vital salaries. Palmeras del Pacífico was acquitted by the Forestry District of Esmeraldas due to lack of evidence. Aiquisa was sanctioned with a fine of 10 minimum vital salaries. The case against Agrícola San Lorenzo was rendered void by the appeals court due to administrative errors. Teobrama was sanctioned with a fine of 10 minimum vital salaries, and the same fine was imposed on Ales Palma (the minimum vital salary amounts to 4 American dollars!).

The activity of oil palm companies is also affecting the Forest Heritage of the State. Ales Palma has areas which "overlap" the Forest Heritage of the State in Ricaurte; Alzamora has similar "overlapping areas" in Corriente Larga; Palesma in Campanita and partly in the mangroves reserve Cayapas-Mataje, and Palmeras de los Andes, in Corriente Larga. Such illegal awards were made by the National Institute of Agricultural Development, INDA (Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Agrario), which has been accused of being a "cave of thieves" by the Minister of Agriculture.

As a consequence of so many irregular situations, on March 14, 2001, the Constitutional Court decided in favour of the appeal filed by environmental organizations to immediately halt the further implementation of oil palm monoculture activities and to declare a state of environmental emergency in the province of Esmeraldas, demanding the initiation of legal actions to sanction those who have cleared forests and that the action of the Ministry of Environment be in accordance with the legal provisions in force.

Instead of abiding by the legal provisions, San Lorenzo's palm cultivators threatened to paralyze activities and leave the zone, stating that the Ministry of Environment was not providing them with "sufficient guarantees". Former Minister of Environment Rendón insinuated that his resignation, which occurred a few days after those declarations, had been the result of the oil palm companies' pressure.

Despite all the evidence regarding the illegal activities of oil palm companies and despite the ruling of the Constitutional Court banning further oil palm activities in the region, the situation continues to be serious. The derisory fines imposed, the fact that no one has been indicted on the charges provided for those guilty of forest destruction, and that no civil servant collaborating with deforestation has been sanctioned for negligence, are proof of the above. Furthermore, the companies continue with their business in zones in which the State cannot even enter, by making use of their power and influence within the Government, and thus evading all sort of sanction and control.

The current devastation in the province of Esmeraldas arises from a logic of development that allows the destruction of forests to give way to monocultures; shrimp exports in exchange for mangrove destruction; wood extraction over biodiversity. And on top of it all, the green province of Esmeraldas is affected by the aerial spraying carried out during these months in Colombia to eradicate coca cultivation. This Garden of Eden should be urgently declared in emergency.

By: Ricardo Buitrón, Acción Ecológica, June 25, 2001.

