
"Forward, Brazil" . . . towards further destruction of the Amazon

From 27 to 29 March Brazilian politicians, forestry officials, industry and NGO representatives got together in the city of Brasilia during the seminar "Amazonia XXI Century: Perspectives for Sustainable Development", to discuss the future of the Amazon forest, the largest tropical rainforest in the world. In spite of the dramatic process of deforestation and forest degradation that has for years been affecting this vast and rich geographical space, an optimistic vision reigned during the meeting. The basis for such optimism was the idea that "sustainable forest management" is the tool that can solve every problem.

The industry sector, represented by the Confederação Nacional das Industrias (National Industrial Federation), defended selective logging as the adequate technical tool to reach "sustainable development" of the Amazon region, and warned against catastrophistic and alarmist visions in relation to its future. The NGO representative basically shared the idea of the adequacy of sustainable forest management as the way to conserve the forests. Even though both groups mentioned the need to control illegal logging, social and cultural aspects were not part of their interventions.

The optimistic meeting was interrupted when a group of dozens of indigenous people representing different nations, invaded the auditorium and expressed their viewpoints. They said that they wished to continue being indians, that they wanted to preserve their forest and their cultures and that for that aim they needed support. The Kayapó leader O-Kiaboro reminded the audience that the arrival of the Europeans to the territory that would become Brazil had meant the beginning of the destruction of nature and indigenous cultures. His people have no reasons to be optimistic with regard to the future of the Amazon. On the contrary, they perceive that they are losing their home and that the authorities do nothing to protect their rights. He advocated for the strengthening of the status and functions of FUNAI (government agency for indigenous affairs), which is currently being dismantled. Another indigenous representative expressed plainly how they felt about FUNAI by saying: "They say that FUNAI is not useful. But all the indigenous people have told me: it's bad to have it but much worse not to." Once all the indigenous representatives had expressed their positions, they left and the discussions continued in more or less the same optimistic vein as before: sustainable management is the solution to the problem.

But among the many issues not discussed in the meeting was that of the consequences of this "management" for forests. One of the consequences would be the opening of the forest canopy --resulting from selective logging-- which would make the forest even more prone to the forest fires which are currently destroying vast areas of the Amazon.

But probably the worse aspect of the selective logging approach is that it is being used by the government to support its largest industrial plan for this century to exploit the resources of the Amazon. Incredibly enough, after the environmental and social disaster which resulted from the programme "Pra frente, Brasil!" ("Brazil to the front!"), implemented during the military dictatorship of the 60's and 70's, and to the criticism raised in 1997 by the "Brazil in Action" plan, regarding investments in infrastructure, new settlements and the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the

Amazon region, the government insists now in the so called "Forward, Brazil!" plan. This new grandiose scheme will --among many other negative projects-- open up the Amazon forest by doubling the road network in the region. This would make possible the exploitation of the entire stock of wood and would lead to the final liquidation of the forest.

In sum, the conservation of the Amazon forest is not a technical issue which can be solved by focusing on "sustainable forest management" methods. In the current political context, to focus on those issues in fact implies playing to the hands of the government-backed corporations that are currently preparing to exploit the remnants of what 50 years ago remained basically untouched and which was being used in a truly sustainable manner by the indigenous peoples that inhabited it.

Article based on information from: "A morte da Floresta Amazônica no século XXI" by Rodolfo Salm, Correio da Cidadania 239, abril 2001, Special Edition, and further information sent to the WRM by the same author on 15 April.