
Argentina: A shady carbon sink project

While government representatives were discussing at the Hague the supposed benefits of including forests and plantations in the so-called Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Change Convention, an unusual project in Argentina was giving reason to those opposing such inclusion.

In February this year the company "El Foyel S.A.", the new owner of a plot of 7,800 hectares located in El Foyel, in the southern Province of Río Negro, addressed the Andean Forest Service (SFA) to apply for an authorization to open up and rehabilitate several kilometres of roads within a forest in the region, and to cut 300 hectares of this valuable ecosystem in order to substitute it with oregon and radiata pine plantations. This forest borders the Nahuel Huapí National Park, close to the touristic city of Bariloche.

Three months later, even lacking the required authorization, the company began the logging operations. The SFA reacted accusing it of "blatant infringement of the law", causing the destruction of one hundred cypress trees, as well as "ñire" (*Nothofagus antarctica*), "maitén" (*Maytenus boaria*) and other native tree species. Nevertheless, this episode is but the tip of the iceberg of a much more shady situation. In fact, the project implies the destruction, not of 300 but of 4,500 hectares of forests and their substitution by pines.

To present the undertaking under a "green" mask, the proponents claim that the project includes the "sustainable management" of 1,800 hectares of native forest, including species such as "lenga" (*Nothofagus punilis*) and cypress. However, its main objective is to make profits from both wood extraction and the sale of carbon credits.

The strong links of the involved businessmen with local authorities have made it possible that, despite the project's characteristics, the Provincial Office for the environment approved the Environmental Impact Study. The final decision on the project is now in the hands of the Forestry Department. For the time being, the project has been suspended as a result of the sanctions it received for having started the opening of roads without due permission.

Local villagers, academics and experts have expressed their opposition to the project. The NGO "Comunidad de Limay" is involved in a campaign to stop it, and has gone to court arguing that a process of public consultation has not taken place and that the project breaches the law, which protects native forests. Additionally Dr. Thomas Kitzberger and Dr. Estela Raffaele, of the National University of Comahue, warned that the project is located close to a national park, in an area where the North Patagonian Corridor is projected --aimed at protecting the mobility of species and thus to protect biodiversity. Their report also questions the "sustainable development" management techniques proposed to manage the 1,800 hectares of forest which will not be cut down. The Andean Forestry Service has underscored that the felling of ñire can adversely affect other native species --such as cypress-- which grow associated to it. Concern over the aggressive way oregon pine regenerates --leading eventually to the substitution of native species-- has also been expressed. Other scientists from the National University of Comahue point out that there is no evidence that pine

plantations are more efficient than forests concerning carbon dioxide absorption.

On November 5th the protest gained the streets, when environmentalist NGOs of Chubut and Río Negro organized a demonstration "in favour of the biodiversity of the Southern forests of the Planet". Proyecto Lemu, the Chubut Antinuclear Movement, Mapuche and Tehuelche indigenous groups, Greenpeace-Argentina, Puelo Bird Society, Atech and Cetera participated in the mobilization.

Even though Argentina is commonly associated with vast prairies, it is also true that at the beginning of the 20th century the country had more than 100 million hectares of forests. Nowadays there are less than 20 million hectares left, and half of them are suffering an accelerated process of degradation. The expansion of pine and eucalyptus monocultures poses a direct threat to these surviving ecosystems, and the case of El Foyel is but one in a long list of forest destruction.

The same as in other projects implemented in several countries, this "carbon sink" project clearly shows that such an approach is not the solution to global climate --since more carbon is released to the atmosphere through deforestation than that absorbed by tree planting-- and that it causes severe social and environmental impacts at the local level. Nonetheless, they are big business for a few businessmen, for whom the tragedy of climate

change is but a new and excellent opportunity for making money.

Article based on information from: Lucas Chiappe, Coordinator of "Proyecto Lemu", 24/10/2000 y 19/11/2000; Juan Carlos Villalonga, Greenpeace Argentina, 24/10/2000, "Algunos datos de los daños ecológicos en nuestro país" by Ramón Regés, November 2000.