
Chile: forest management by indigenous communities

In Southern Chile, near Osorno, lies the Huitrapulli estate -a 20,000 hectare forest, inhabited since time immemorial by Mapuche-Huilliche indigenous peoples. The area is part of the extensive forests of Valdivia, which constitute one of the world's last non-fragmented reserves of temperate rainforests. The area is characterized by its biological diversity and by high levels of endemism.

Local communities have always profited from the use of forest and coastal seaside resources, having developed a gathering economy, which by definition requires large extensions of territory. The area's relative isolation and the limited agricultural value of the land determined that it was spared of the European and Chilean colonization processes suffered by other Mapuche communities during the 19th Century.

However, the expansion of forestry activities in Chile -particularly monoculture tree plantations- during the last decades resulted in a new interest in those lands. The situation reached a critical level when the owner of a neighbouring estate began to occupy lands within the Huitrapulli estate, displacing the Huilliche communities. Such situation resulted in a number of conflicts which lead to the intervention of the police and the judiciary, where the communities and their professional advisors were taken to court accused of land seizure.

In an unprecedented action, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled in favour of the communities and their advisors, pointing out that the lands belonged to the State, while at the same time recognizing the ancestral occupation of the territory by the Huilliche. Subsequently, the ownership of the land was transferred from the Ministry of National Assets to the National Corporation of Indigenous Development (CONADI), as a first step in the land regularization process.

At the beginning of this year, CONADI hired a group of consultants with the task of elaborating a proposal for the regularization of land titling, tied to an associated development proposal. The study, currently under implementation, is being carried out with the active participation of the involved families and will put forward suggestions regarding the boundaries between the communities at the interior of the estate, as well as on the type of land tenure (individual, communal, or mixed). The development plan will include an evaluation of existing resources and a number of projects aimed at the equitable and sustainable sharing of benefits from those resources.

The case of these Huilliche communities is very important, because it constitutes an exception within the context of the traditional relationship between the Chilean State and the Mapuche people, which has included numerous conflicts regarding indigenous peoples' territorial rights. The success of this experience will be crucial for its replication in Chile and eventually in other countries of the region facing similar problems.

This case is also very important to highlight the role that indigenous communities play in forest conservation. The Huilliche have for centuries used this forest sustainably, while most of Southern Chile's forests were being destroyed by "development". The legal recognition of land ownership constitutes a necessary step to ensure the future conservation of this unique forest by those who are

most interested in its conservation: the Mapuche-Huilliche people themselves.

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