
Costa Rica: the depredatory practices of an oil palm plantation company

Palma Tica is a company working in the area of cultivation, processing and production of oil palm products. It owns thousands of hectares of oil palm plantations (*Elaeis guineensis*) in the Central Pacific Region (Quepos Division) and in the Southern Region (Coto Division). To face the rapid advance of its competitor Agroindustrial Cooperative of Oil Palm Producers (Coopeagropal R.L.), Palma Tica started in 1995 an aggressive campaign of land purchasing in the communities of Colorada and La Palma de Corredores, located in the extreme south of the Coto Division. The company bought more than one thousand hectares, including several estates with oil palm already in a productive stage.

In January 1997 Palma Tica began to expand its plantations at Hacienda La Palma estate after clearing a secondary forest area. The fact was denounced to the Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE). Officials of the Ministry inspected the affected area and demanded Palma Tica to stop deforestation. The newspaper "La Nacion" published an article titled "MINAE recommends Palma Tica".

In February, three members of the Surveillance Committee for Natural Resources (Comite de Vigilancia de Recursos Naturales - COVIRENA) of La Palma de los Corredores inspected the area, after being alerted by a neighbour of La Palma, who had been working for Palma Tica. The company had ignored the "recommendations" of MINAE and continued advancing to reach its main objective: an area of about one hundred hectares of wetlands and primary forests at the bottom of the La Palma gully. They found that a vast area of such wetlands had been deforested, and that a stretch of about one kilometre and a half long had been dredged at La Palma gully -where the Colorado River flows- with the purpose of draining the whole wetland. To complete the dredging works, the whole vegetation cover of the area -including the trees located at the right bank of the gully- had been destroyed, and the area converted in a quagmire. The waters at the gully were brown-coloured. Many lizards and turtles died, as well as fishes and crustaceans, that the inhabitants of La Palma used as food and leisure resources. COVIRENA went to Court to denounce this depredation. To preserve its public image, Palma Tica abandoned its previous idea of planting oil palm in that area, and currently the flora and fauna are slowly recovering.

Even though the La Palma gully now seems to be relatively well protected, this experience does not seem to have served the purpose of improving Palma Tica's attitude regarding the environment and people. Given its obvious impunity concerning law compliance, Palma Tica has always applied an abusive and disdainful labour policy and continues doing so, through a sub-contracting system similar to that of the banana companies. Palma Tica hires contractors which lend themselves to foul play and, in exchange of money and privileges, assume the role of bosses. They then subcontract agricultural labourers in need of a job, who work to earn miserable salaries, without any social security or other benefits, and exposed to systematic dismissals every three months. Many of them are illegal workers -immigrants from Panama and Nicaragua- who arrive in Costa Rica with the illusion of finding better job opportunities.

The presence of Palma Tica has provoked a stagnation of the economy and community

disintegration at La Palma. Young people and adults have migrated in search of job opportunities. Crime has increased while poverty and insecurity reign.

After the events that took place at La Palma gully, Palma Tica did not abandon entirely its original intention of expanding plantations at the expense of natural areas. The company recently moved to neighbouring Osa Peninsula, where local conservationist groups have already denounced illegal logging in several gullies in the locality of Canaza.

The case of Palma Tica is typical of a very powerful company that hides itself under different names, so that it is practically impossible to identify those who are responsible for its depredatory actions. Uncertainty and distrust are so widespread that rumours are circulating that Costa Rica's President himself, Miguel Angel Rodriguez Echeverria, is suspected of being one of the shareholders of this big company, which makes profits at the expense of natural resources and that of the impoverished workers and people. To the world's eyes, Costa Rica has gained prestige as a country committed to the conservation of natural resources and the defence of social rights. However, those of us who live here know that a great part of that is pure demagoguery serving the interests of those who hold economic power.

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