
Thailand: eucalyptus and Jiang Zemin's coming lesson

In the 1980s and early 1990s the monoculture plantations scheme -based on eucalyptus- faced strong opposition from farmers and environmental groups in Thailand, especially by the more than ten million people inhabiting National Reserve Forests, due to their detrimental social and environmental effects. Such massive protests led in 1992 to a ban on afforestation activities in those lands, and to the discouragement of both foreign and domestic investments in relation to large-scale eucalyptus plantations. Shell itself -which had planned to implement extensive pulpwood plantations- decided to leave the country as a result of the peoples' opposition.

In spite of this very recent background and while the plantation scheme is being severely questioned worldwide because of its proven negative effects, the Thai government is now in negotiations with China to establish 96,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantation as part of a proposal to form a Thai-Chinese pulp-production joint venture. The idea was discussed during the visit of President Jiang Zemin of China to Thailand last September. The raw material produced in the plantations would feed a pulp mill located in Prachin Buri, which would produce 700,000 tons of pulp annually to supply the increasing demand of paper in the Chinese market.

The Agriculture Ministry has earmarked an area of land of about 32,000 hectares in the eastern Chachoengsao Province to accommodate the first stage of the project. This land is property of Suan Paa Kitti Company and it is the only area near Bangkok that before the 1992 ban was allowed to locate a commercial tree plantation. This firm was involved in a great controversy about ten years ago, because one year after receiving the concession, it was proved that it slashed and burned forest land outside the concession area. A forest reserve in Tha Takiab Province has been selected as the second choice to house successive stages of the plan.

Since the area covered by forests has greatly decreased in Thailand, the authorities say that fast-growing plantations are needed to increase forest cover and to avoid further pressure on forests. Nevertheless, reality shows that both arguments are false. On the one hand, the important task of increasing forest cover should be addressed by reforestation with native species, which is something completely different from afforestation with eucalyptus or any other exotic species. On the other hand, in Thailand, as well in many other Southern countries, huge areas of forests have been cleared to give place to exotic tree monocultures, while other areas have been cleared by people displaced by plantations from their own lands. Plantations therefore not only do not relieve pressure on forests but constitute a direct cause of deforestation.

Villagers oppose the tree monoculture scheme based on their past experience, which shows that large-scale eucalyptus plantations displace or impoverish farmers since eucalyptus allows little intercropping, is useless for fodder, supply little firewood, can lower water levels in nearby ponds, wells and woodlands, and cause soil erosion instead of controlling it as their promoters say. In addition, they provide few of the varied forest goods that rural communities depend on for subsistence, while taking over community forest lands. Farmers also find plantation jobs unattractive since they are neither plentiful nor steady.

As expected, the project has already generated protests at the civil society level. Pornpana Kuaycharoen, from the Foundation for Ecological Recovery, expressed that plantations would damage the country's ecosystems and the peasants' water supply, as had happened a decade before. Pakphum Vithantiravat, from the Forum of Northeastern Farmers, supports this point of view and reminds that many farmers who planted eucalyptus under the 1985 promotion have already cut them and come back to rice cultivation. Pakphum Withantiwat, adviser of the Forum of the Poor, points out that eucalyptus are not planted in arid lands, but on fertile ones, so that they can grow faster. At the same time, the Alternative Farming Network expressed its opposition to the project because the eastern region of the country has got soils with a potential for rice production, which is much more important for local villagers than eucalyptus plantations.

There is no doubt that the plantation scheme is connected to ongoing globalization. In January 1999, during a visit to Japan, Chinese President Jiang Zemin received a proposal by the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren) so that an afforestation programme is initiated in China by a group of Japanese companies, in a bid to secure greater quotas for emitting carbon dioxide under the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol (see WRM Bulletin 20). Mr Jiang Zemin seems to have quickly learned the lesson and now he is proposing Thailand to implement a huge eucalyptus plantation project to supply the pulp industry with raw material. But he is probably unaware about the lesson he will need to learn: that the Thai people will strongly oppose this plan as they successfully did in the past.

Sources: "Thai-Chinese plant needs huge areas for eucalyptus", Bangkok Post, 24/8/99; "Land found for China eucalyptus plan" by P. Hongthong, The Nation, 8/9/99; "State forest policies are in contradiction", Bangkok Post, 13/9/99; "Plantation initiative finds favour" by U. Noikorn and W. Techawongtham, Bangkok Post, 15/9/99; "Pressure groups in arms against eucalyptus scheme" by U. Noikorn, 22/9/99.