
Mitch effects and deforestation in Nicaragua

The Nicaraguan territory lies in a zone of the Earth especially prone to natural phenomena such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes. Their consequences are generally presented as the result of the rage of nature, without taking into account that the negative effects of natural agents depends not only upon their intensity but also on the vulnerability of the affected society and territory. The case of hurricane Mitch, that affected the NW region of Nicaragua (Occidente and Las Segovias) can be considered paradigmatic in this regard, since economic policy, poverty, bureaucracy, corruption and unsustainable use of land and natural resources had put the country in the worst possible conditions to face this kind of phenomena.

The Northwest suffered massive clearcutting of its tropical dry forests during the last 50 years to give place to cotton and banana monocultures for export. These forests have almost completely disappeared and only a few degraded areas with shrub formations survive. Lacking forest cover, nearly 20% of the soils present signs of severe erosion, so that during the dry season topsoil is blown off while in the rainy season it washes away (see WRM Bulletin 17).

Two tragic examples show the close relationship between Mitch and deforestation in Nicaragua. Due to the deforestation at the upper Rio Coco watershed, the 500 mm of rain fallen during the hurricane caused the river to rise 20 metres and to burst its banks. At the village of Wiwili, more than 600 houses were washed away and another 1300 houses were affected. Even if the authorities were warned of the danger of flooding on the upper reaches of the Rio Coco, no actions were taken to prevent the tragedy. Another serious case of negligence resulted in tragedy at Las Casitas Volcano. Two days before the crater lake collapsed INETER (Nicaraguan Institute for Territorial Studies) warned the government that conditions were becoming unstable and that potential mud and landslides might occur. An enormous mudslide swept down the side of the mountain, burying entire small villages. 2500 men, women and children -all of them small peasants- died. Many survivors got ill from swallowing and inhaling mud or had their legs amputated. Some days after the tragedy people were to be seen, wandering around with a humble cross in their hands, guessing where their relatives were buried by the mudslide and trying to pay them a posthumous tribute.

Such terrible consequences are not inevitable, but unless drastic economic, social and environmental changes are implemented, they will continue to occur. Nicaragua approved in 1993 an Environmental Action Plan, but until now such plan has only existed on paper. Until this and other more comprehensive socioeconomic plans favour a different approach to the relationship between nature and society, as well as within society, then forests, soils, water, biodiversity and -even more importantly- people, will continue to suffer.

Sources: Monitoreo Ambiental, Nr. 1, Año 5, enero 1999; visit to the area by Alvaro González, January 1999.

