
New Push for Industrial Tree Plantations Meets Community Resistance

There is a perceptible push by the plantations industry to position industrial tree plantations as a benign solution to the climate and biodiversity crisis, even as indispensable for overcoming this crisis.

The industry highlights tree's ability to absorb carbon and to provide raw material for a 'decarbonized', 'bio'-economy. The propaganda (and interests) perpetrating these claims however silences many contradictions and injustices. Here we outline just a few of them.

To begin with, the carbon absorbed by trees will never be able to compensate for the carbon released from the oil and carbon deposits that are stored for millennia underground. The idea that the climate impact of all carbon is the same, be it the from deforestation or from burning oil, gas or coal, is a key underlying (false) assumption that sustains offsets – which in turn is the main pillar for carbon markets, REDD+, 'net zero emissions', 'zero net deforestation', and now also the so-called 'nature-based solutions.'

"Claiming that all carbon is the same also helps conceal the violence, ecological destruction and the abuse of power that have been the foundation of the corporate fossil fuel empires. It also spreads this violence and abuse to where offset projects are supposedly storing an equivalent amount of the released carbon." (1)

Another crucial point that is entirely silenced in the companies' and governments' propaganda aiming to expand monocultures is that industrial plantations are much more than trees. These plantations are part of a monoculture model that was violently imposed in the colonial era. A model which is based on racism, land theft, violent oppression of those pushed off of their land, ecological devastation, and destruction of local economies as well as of social, spiritual and cultural relationships.

Industrial plantations were central to the process of colonialism and to its expansion. Monocultures enforce a specific way of organizing land (and in consequence people) that violently replaces other ways of organising land (with people), for example, as forest commons or in accordance with Indigenous Peoples' practices and governance systems. (2) As Larry Lohmann pointed out in his 2011 presentation 'Plantations and Colonialism', the *"slave-worked plantations of the past and the industrial plantations of today do not merely prop up colonialism; they are constituted by colonialism."* (3)

There is clearly an economic connection to this process. The slave plantation colonies of the Americas not only supplied premium commodities, but were also a captive market for metal tools, textiles and provisions for the British empire of the early and mid-18th century. The plantations were themselves by-products of a new economic system.

The next large industrial plantations' expansion in the global South took place in the 1960s and was driven by the industry's fabricated 'needs' for increased consumption of pulp and wood in

industrialised countries. The plantations' industry has thus been key in creating an ever-growing expansion in consumption of wood-based products, especially in the global North. As stated in the 1996 book 'Pulping the South', *"plantations are established because they serve certain interests, [and] make sense with certain discourses"*. (4)

As a way to confront the (also ever-growing) resistance and criticisms against these monocultures, plantations companies are not only claiming that this monoculture model is a solution to the climate, biodiversity and deforestation crisis, but they also claim to produce wood-based products that are 'sustainable' - such as 'bio-fuels', 'wood-based fibres', 'wood-based plastics', etc. Besides the many arguments and testimonies that can counter these claims, as Lohmann explains in the presentation mentioned above, talking about 'sustainable' industrial eucalyptus or oil palm plantations is like talking about sustainable colonialism or sustainable overaccumulation.

This new push comes with new euphemisms – such as 'reforestation', 'restoration', 'nature-based solutions' (6), 'carbon removals', among many others. But most pressingly, nowadays, is that plantations companies are pushing to advance this monoculture model even further deceptively arguing that they can also bring development and wealth to rural land owners signing up to corporate outgrower schemes. The outgrower or smallholder scheme (also referred to as contract farming) is a strategy being used by plantations companies to keep expanding their monocultures despite the strong and consistent resistance to their large-scale concessions.

"This approach allows companies to continue to expand control over even more lands and increase their [palm oil] production, without being accused of becoming big land owners or evicting peasant families. Governments have also started to promote such schemes to avoid the social conflicts that handing large concessions to corporations provokes. Contract farming has also become a tactic for [palm oil] companies to access new, often public funding from development banks, aid agencies, governments and other funders. They claim these contracts benefit peasant farmers, when in reality those who benefit are the companies and their financial backers." (7)

Plantation companies' promises (meaning, lies) are not new; but their discourses and deceptions are certainly shaped according to their current interests to increase market opportunities and demand for their plantations as well as to the resistance and criticisms from the ground.

"The companies and investors responsible for these plantations have always denied their negative and severe impacts, and they regularly develop disinformation campaigns designed to garner government support, win over the media, convince investors to finance their plantations, and persuade consumers to buy their products. Just as importantly, these campaigns target the very communities impacted by such plantations and they frequently contribute to intimidating and criminalizing community members who fight against the plantations, in order to silence any resistance." (8)

The reality of industrial plantations, no matter the discourse and propaganda behind them, has always been that of corporate control over community fertile lands. The monoculture model inherently endangers communities' survival, food sovereignty and autonomy, and enforces the same destructive and oppressive way of organizing land (and its people) as the one enforced during the colonial era.

The overwhelming impacts of this massive land grab for corporate profit are immeasurable. (9) Yet, WRM has learned during our conversations with women living in and around these industrial plantations that one aspect that is inherent to the plantations' model has largely remained invisible.

The monoculture model also deepens the violence of patriarchy.

“When these industrial plantations encroach onto community land, sexual violence, rape and abuse against women and girls increases dramatically. This happens wherever industrial plantations are established and irrespective of whether the plantation crop is palm oil or rubber.

Most women who suffer incidents of sexual violence in and around these industrial plantations suffer in silence. Few report incidents of assault, rape or sexual harassment for fear of retribution and further abuse by authorities and company personnel. This, in turn, exposes women to more sexual violence and abuse as the perpetrators face virtually no risk of being held to account for the violence they inflict on women. Cultural norms that stigmatize women who are raped, blame them for the assault and expose their families to shame, add insult to injury for these women. Too often, women suffer not only in silence but also alone.” (10)

As corporate expansion increases, communities have weaved different forms of resistance.

One of the first pulp mills resulting from the 1960's plantations' expansion was the Aracruz mill in Brazil, built literally on top of the Indigenous Tupinikim village called Macacos. To set up its eucalyptus industrial plantations, the Aracruz company stole the lands of tens of other Tupinikim communities and destroyed the Atlantic rainforest, including the many streams and rivers the Tupinikim in this region depended upon. The devastating destruction of the Tupinikim villages and their territory was, at the same time, the beginning of a 40-years struggle (5), by which the Tupinikim communities, in alliance with Indigenous Guaraní communities, who joined their struggle in the 1960ies, recovered a great part of their territory. Their struggle inspired other communities in Brazil and elsewhere to resist the advance of eucalyptus plantations and to reclaim lands taken by multinational pulp and paper companies.

Indigenous Peoples and forests-dependant communities' struggles against industrial monocultures are defending their lands and forests, their commons, their relationships and connections and their life spaces nurtured with their histories, knowledge and understandings.

Rosalva Gomes, an activist from the Interstate Movement of Babassu [Coconut] Breakers in Brazil, explained, *“There is no ready-made recipe for resistance. It depends on each territory and the scope of each territory. It depends a lot on the internal strength of each territory and the specifics of each country, state and community. But there is a unifying strategy, because there is one thing we are sure of: if we do not strengthen and join forces, we will suffer very great impacts, even greater ones [than we currently experience]. We are already going through many difficulties. Unifying forces among communities and organizations is one of the paths of resistance.” (11)*

WRM continues to endeavour to support and accompany community resistances.

(1) Is all Carbon the same? Fossil carbon, violence and power, in [‘15 years of REDD. A Mechanism Rotten at the Core’](#). See also, [WRM, What could be wrong about planting trees?](#).

(2) [Plantations and Colonialism](#). Presentation by Larry Lohmann at the 4 December 2011 Fake Forest Day in Durban, South Africa; See also a [video of this presentation](#) as delivered in Durban, South Africa in 2011.

(3) Idem 2

(4) Carrere, Ricardo and Lohmann, L (1996), [Pulping the South, Industrial Tree Plantations and the World Paper Economy](#).

(5) WRM Bulletin, [A Struggle Lasting More than 40 Years](#).

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- (6) WRM Bulletin, [Nature-based Solutions: Concealing a massive land robbery](#).
- (7) WRM, [Nine Reasons to Say NO to Contract Farming with Palm Oil Companies](#).
- (8) WRM, [12 Replies to 12 Lies about Industrial Tree Plantations](#).
- (9) Find many articles and materials highlighting the struggles against industrial monoculture plantations [here](#).
- (10) [Breaking the Silence: Harassment, sexual violence and abuse against women in and around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations](#).
- For more information see: [Sexual Exploitation and Violence against Women at the Root of the Industrial Plantation Model](#); [Impacts of Large Scale Oil Palm Plantations on Women](#).
[Patriarchies in the Forests in India: Communities in Peril](#).
- (11) WRM Bulletin, [The sowing of resistance and collective organization](#).