



WRM Bulletin 238
World Rainforest Movement
June / July 2018

**Good fire or bad fire, who decides?
A reflection on fire and forests**



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This bulletin has articles written by the following organizations:

The Corner House, UK; The Institute for Ecosoc Rights, Indonesia; MapuExpress, Chile; Acción Ecológica, Ecuador; indigenous leader from the Peruvian Amazon and members of the WRM secretariat.

Good fire or bad fire, who decides? A reflection on fire and forests

Our Viewpoint

Fires, forests and peoples: knowledge and practices under threat



When we think of the word "fire" we usually imagine something harmful, dangerous and even polluting. Nevertheless, while some fires can be highly destructive, **fire can also be a great ally for forest peoples**. In fact, fire is and has been a living element present in the various forests of the world since time immemorial, ignited as much by "nature" (through lightning, plants that spontaneously combust or intense droughts) as well as by human beings. Indigenous peoples and peasants use controlled fires in many parts of the world for various purposes, historically helping to enrich the diversity of habitats and the environments they inhabit. **Shifting or migratory agriculture, which establishes adequate cycles, spaces and times for fire management, is a crucial practice that ensures food sovereignty.**

Ironically, this knowledge and these ancestral practices of use and management of fire in relation to forests, are the same ones that are being **identified by the main policies on climate change as the cause of deforestation and forest fires.**

Blaming itinerant or migratory agriculture for deforestation is nothing new. In recent decades, governments of countries that contain tropical forests – and in following the "advice" and donations/loans received from multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and others - have labeled itinerant agriculture as an "inefficient," "primitive" and "forest-destroying" practice. Such governments have **promoted or forced the transformation of itinerant agricultural lands into more intensive activities** (such as agribusiness, logging or the spread of monoculture tree plantations for industry).

The forest peoples who use itinerant agriculture have been persecuted, displaced and criminalized. Meanwhile, the mega industries that have imposed themselves on forests and their inhabitants, burning thousands and even millions of hectares to open up the land to commercial activities, which, for the most part, simply intensifies and facilitates forest fires, are completely unrestricted. Quite the opposite in fact. As an article in this bulletin reveals, **the fire regime of capitalism is underpinned by the combustion burning away in the thousands of factories, extraction points and existing combustion engines,** viewed not only as perfectly legal interventions but also a supposed model to follow.

Another article in this bulletin also tells **the story of the indigenous Delang people in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia.** This is a region plagued by palm oil plantations, and where a violent prohibition has been imposed on itinerant agriculture, which has been blamed for the fires that have scorched the country. Local people have thus been left with no alternatives for their sustenance. While large-scale fires have increased in Indonesia over the last decade, the article highlights how **80% of the forests in Central Kalimantan have been converted to palm oil plantations, and most of the forest fires occurred in these allocated locations.** While the palm oil firms remain unpunished in the face of their clear role in deforestation and fires, the Delang people continue to suffer the violent consequences.

So, if governments have been already banning itinerant agriculture, what then has changed? Climate change, large-scale deforestation and their consequences continue to increase. The actors behind climate change policies are once again hiding the root causes of this problem. Taking advantage of media hype about forest fires, prohibitions against "indigenous burning" and the use of itinerant agriculture are being promoted even more robustly.

Almost all programs and projects on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), for example, identify itinerant agriculture as a threat to forests. Consequently, they severely limit or simply prohibit such practices, while to exercise these limits and prohibitions they frequently count on the support of armed guards. However, the real causes of large-scale deforestation, such as industrial logging, mega infrastructure projects, mining, huge hydroelectric dams, large industrial tree, oil palm and soybeans plantations, along with industrial-scale animal breeding sites and other such interventions, take place without any limits or prohibitions.

Starting with the question **Who is really burning the Amazon?** we present an article that delves deeply into the causes behind the fires threatening these tropical forests.

Another article provides **a detailed explanation of what's happening in Chile, where the monoculture tree plantations of the pulp and paper industry** have been the scene of raging forest fires that have blighted the ancestral territories of the indigenous Mapuche and the lands of small farmers. The author reminds us of the **immense power wielded by such corporations,** not only to destroy the environment for their own benefit and with no legal consequence, but also of their collusion with government agencies to prevent judicial investigations, while simultaneously orchestrating media campaigns to criminalize the Mapuche.

Then there's **the case of Quito, Ecuador,** which for different reasons is also emblematic. A "green belt" surrounding the capital is nothing less than a plantation of eucalyptus trees. **Lacking the diversity afforded by native trees, replaced by a monoculture of highly**

flammable exotic species, the evermore intense fires that threaten the city during each dry season have basically been facilitated.

Another article recapitulates **a resistance struggle that took place in the late 80's in Portugal's Lila Valley.** Local people tore down the eucalyptus plantations from their land, and prevented the planting of new eucalyptus monocultures, a stance they have maintained right up to the present. Despite the voracious fires that plague the forests and fields of that country every year, this particular zone has never burned.

And finally we include in this bulletin **the struggle of the indigenous Shawi people** who inhabit the Peruvian Amazon. This time the threat to the environment that sustains them comes in the form of **the world's largest gold mining multinational: the Barrick Gold Corporation.**

We conclude this editorial with an anonymous poem from Africa taken from the book "Memories of Fire I" by the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano, who reminds us how beautiful and powerful fire is, and what it means for communities the world over. Enjoy!

Bantu People's Song of the Fire

*Fire gazed on by people in the night,
in the deep night.
Fire you blaze without burning, you glow
without blazing.
Fire you fly without a body.
Fire you have no heart, you know not a
home or hut.
Transparent fire of palm trees:
a man calls on you unafraid.
Fire of sorcerers, your father, where is he?
Your mother, where is she?
Who has fed you?
You are your father, you are your mother.
You pass by but leave no trace.*

*Dry wood does not spawn you,
You have not ashes as daughters.
You die yet die you not.
the wondering soul transforms you, but no
one is aware.
Fire of sorcerers,
Spirit of the waters below and air above.
Fire that glows, firefly that lights up the
marshlands.
Bird without wings, object without body,
Spirit of the Power of Fire.
Listen to my voice:
a man calls on you
unafraid.*

*Eduardo Galeano
Memory of Fire (I. Genesis)*

Challenging capitalist fire



Vernacular fire in Western Australia

Learning and unlearning have always been key to supporting struggles to defend forests.

Learning from forest-dependent people how they protect their territories and livelihoods.

Unlearning destructive doctrines advocated by many economists, professional foresters, state officials, even well-meaning environmentalists.

Sometimes what has to be unlearned are uses of the simplest words.

In Bali, for example, one of the first things that outsiders learn is that what might seem a “neutral” word – *water* – is full of problematic biases. Local movements constantly have to fight the idea that water is a discrete, ownable, global resource whose underlying essence is expressed in the symbol H_2O . Across much of Bali, water is something different: full of its own energies and indivisible from forests, land, fish, Vishnu (a Hindu divinity), dance and the ever-dynamic *subak* irrigation system. (1)

Prevailing definitions of many other “simple” words also often need to be unlearned – or at least put in a new perspective. Otherwise, they risk becoming little more than a residue of political defeats.

For example, the word *land* today connotes geometric blocks of space that can be monopolized by faraway private owners. But that became possible only because of hundreds of years of political aggression involving property law, fence technology, banking and the rise of powerful states.

Similarly, words like *work* and *job* today refer mostly to wage labour only because unpaid livelihood activities have been systematically devalued and degraded while salaried work has become dominant worldwide, thanks to (among other things) petroleum, patriarchy and plantations.

Such battles continue. Today, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), obedient to corporations and states, is still fighting to include industrial tree monocultures in the definition of *forest*.

But such fights will never be over. Defeats can never be more than partial. **Forest movements’ efforts to reclaim basic words as spaces for their own ways of thinking**

and living reflects not nostalgia, but its opposite: an understanding that that concepts forged in conflict can be – and are being – reforged.

Capital's Fire

One such concept is that of *fire*. **Today, a capitalist conception of fire dominates the world. But vernacular conceptions continue to evolve and struggle against it.** Climate change makes the stakes higher than ever.

Under capitalism, fire moves from the open landscape into boilers, turbines and combustion chambers. At the same time, the open fire used for thousands of years to create and maintain forests and agricultural fields becomes suspect, denigrated, even criminalized. **A vastly more intense, destructive, fossil-fuelled fire inside engines and turbines, meanwhile, becomes a sign of civilization and progress, together with the extraction and waste that accompanies it.**

So when you turn on the TV during the dry season in the tree plantation zones of Chile or Portugal or the state forests of western North America, you can count on seeing scary reports about uncontrollable wildfires and the outlaws rumoured to be behind them.

The reports never mention the fossil-fuelled fires that simultaneously rage invisibly inside every local automobile and thermal power station. Fires that – despite global warming and the devastation that accompanies fossil-fuel extraction – no one would ever dream of regarding as criminal.

Nor do the reports mention that these two problematic phenomena are merely opposite sides of the same coin.

They don't mention that the process of pushing farmers and forest dwellers off their lands – where they often will have used carefully-controlled burns to keep levels of dangerous combustibles low and levels of fertility and animal habitat high – is the same one that concentrates them around the fossil-fuelled machines that use and channel their labour.

They don't mention that the global fire system that makes fast, fossil-fuelled international transport of paper pulp or palm oil possible is the same one that results in the palls of smoke that hang over thousands of hectares of burning Indonesian forest land.

Nor do they mention that the industrial distribution of fire responsible for the traffic and polluted air in cities like Los Angeles, Sydney or Quito is the same one that allows too much plant growth to accumulate in the surrounding landscapes, making inevitable the savage wildfires that periodically rip through such cities' suburbs.

Fire in Climate Policy

Climate policy makes the way fire is organized today even more perverse.

Most climate policymakers are implicitly guided by **the simplistic idea that global warming is caused by fire in the abstract.** They also hold to the **equally simplistic assumption that all fire is the same:** a chemical process of oxidation on top of which various inessential “cultural”, “social”, “spiritual” or “religious” decorations can be draped, depending on local circumstances.

So for them, it seems natural to assume that the rich world's fossil fuel dependence is something that can be "balanced out" by the rich world's taking more control of the lands and biotic fire practices of farmers and forest dwellers in the global South.

Enter REDD, carbon markets and "climate-friendly agriculture" programmes.

Ignoring or disrespecting the diversity and nuanced environmental merits of thousands of vernacular fire regimes, such schemes ironically undermine the very climatic stability they claim to be promoting, allowing stupidity about fire to proliferate even further.

If a single-mindedly chemical understanding of water is an instrument of oppression and environmental destruction in Bali, so too a globalized, chemical understanding of fire is being overgeneralized in a way that threatens land and forests everywhere.

But as global warming worsens and fire-dependent species are driven into extinction, **maybe the time has come to insist more strongly on the hidden history of fire in order to help open new spaces for popular movements.**

Balancing the Story

This history reveals many important facts.

For example, that **the grains that feed the world originate from environments regularly laced by fires** caused both by lightning and by humans.

For example, that in pre-Columbian times, indigenous peoples deliberately expanded the range of bison all the way to what is today New York by **setting fires that created a fertile, park-like mosaic of woods and grasslands** across eastern North America.

For example, that, according to growing archaeological consensus, **human-set fires are in fact partly responsible for the some of the most valuable forests in the world** – not only in obviously fire-prone regions like Australia, Southern Africa and Mexico, but also even in the Amazon.

Once again, the belief that nature and humanity are separate categories – often attributed to the 17th-century French thinker Rene Descartes – turns out to be not just a philosophical, but also a historical, misconception.

Forward with Fire

A more balanced view of fire emerges wherever people have the space and time to listen and interact democratically with local forest dwellers.

In Thailand, for example, the senior state forester Wirawat Theeraprasat tells the story of how, at university, he was taught that all forest fire was bad. Only through years of dialogue with local Karen villagers as the chief of an important wildlife sanctuary did he come to realize the environmental importance of the local fire-setting practices he had been taught to look down on.

The younger Karen leader, Prue Odochao, meanwhile learned when attending international climate summits how important it was to remind activists from the global North that **lists of the causes of global warming should never lump together**, say, Karen farmers using biotic fire on the surface of the earth and fossil fuel companies excavating coal, oil and gas from its depths.

“How many Karen villages,” Prue asked, “have drilled oil wells within their boundaries?”

Environmental historians such as Stephen Pyne and Charles Mann – who have explained how diverse fire systems are in different times and places, and why this is environmentally important – can be of great help in **opening the needed new dialogue on fire. But the discussion, as always, will be powered most of all by continuing struggle at the grassroots.**

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Indonesia: Forest burning and punished victims. The tragedy of the Delang indigenous community in Lamandau, Central Kalimantan



[Available in Bahasa](#)

On a journey from Palangkaraya to Nangabulik, the capital of Lamandau Regency in Central Kalimantan, you see a monotonous landscape: oil palm plantations. If you continue the journey to the border of West Kalimantan, you will come across a hilly area with rather dense forest. Delang indigenous peoples live there. Delang is also the name of the district in Lamandau Regency, Central Kalimantan, which is a buffer area for Lamandau Regency with protected forests and Bukit Sebayan (the Sebayan Hill). It is believed to be a sacred place, where the ancestors of Kaharingan, the ancient religion and peoples of the place, used to live.

Delang indigenous community has long been known for their opposition to various destructive investments in their forest and environment, such as oil palm plantations, mining and forest concessions. Most villages at Lamandau Regency and Central Kalimantan in general, however, have already lost their forests.

Since before the Republic of Indonesia existed, up until today, Delang people have been contributing to forest protection. However, unfortunately, they are being punished instead of rewarded for their valuable contribution. **The government banned their traditional fire-fallow cultivation** (also called 'slash and burn' or swidden cultivation) after vast forest fires rampaged several provinces of Indonesia in 2015.

The blanket banning of shifting cultivation was put in place without any alternative being provided. The ban also contradicts the fact that **the ancient practice of swidden farming is protected by environmental protection and management Law**. Article 62 of the law allows indigenous communities to carry out fire-fallow cultivation on a maximum area of 2 hectares per family for planting local crop varieties and by building a ditch to prevent fire spread.

Banning shifting cultivation farming without providing any alternative is a tragedy for the Delang community. They have become victims of forest fires and forest clearing by corporate burning. However, instead of receiving recovery support or compensation for damage caused by others, they have been punished. The government, using police and the army, harasses them, threatens villagers with many years of imprisonment, terrorizes

communities with water bombs thrown from helicopters. The water used was sourced from fish ponds traditionally used by communities: their ponds were emptied and the water poured back at them in the water bombing.

Forest and land burning in Central Kalimantan

Forest and land fire incidents have been increasing in Indonesia in the last decade. In 1997 and 1998, forest and land fires were spotted in Sumatera, Kalimantan and Papua, with more than 2 million hectares of peatland having been burnt. These fires became one of the biggest contributors of greenhouse gas emissions in Indonesia. (1) **In 2015, forest and land fires took a total area of 1.7 million hectares** (2), of which 770,000 hectares were in Central Kalimantan and 35.9% of this was peatland. (3)

Forest and land fires in Central Kalimantan have been recorded since 1992, which coincides with the development of oil palm plantation in Kotawaringin Barat and Kotawaringin Timur Regency. (4) Forest and land burning in Central Kalimantan has three interconnected major factors, namely 1) deforestation and degraded land due to logging, 2) uncontrolled oil palm plantation expansion and 3) corporation's control over an expanding area of land.

80 per cent of forests in Central Kalimantan have been converted into oil palm plantation or been destroyed through mining, the highest figure of deforestation in Indonesia. (5)

Central Kalimantan's forestry office affirms that in 2010 there were more than 7 million hectares of degraded land, mainly due to logging activities. The Watershed Management office of Kahayan emphasized that 7.27 million hectares of the remaining Central Kalimantan forests have been destroyed, with a deforestation rate of 150,000 hectares per year. (7) **Logged forests and degraded land with scrub are prone to fires.** (8) Large fires are less common in intact tropical forests and, only after a prolonged dry season, these forests would become more vulnerable. **Central Kalimantan's government adopted a policy that stipulated that oil palm plantations are supposed to only expand on "degraded land", however, in reality, intact forests have also been converted into oil palm estates.** (9) The change in forests and climatic events like "El Niño" have aggravated forest fires in the last 20 years. (10)

Oil palm plantation companies began their operations in Central Kalimantan in 1992. Regional regulation essentially facilitates oil palm investment in the region. (11) As a result, massive expansion of oil palm plantations took place unchecked. **Forest and agricultural land, including peatland, have been converted without hesitation.** The total allowed conversion area covers almost the same or a bigger area than that of the regency itself. This reveals an out-of-control permit issuance. In 2012, at least 5 regencies issued land conversion permits to companies that covered equal or bigger areas as the administrative regency itself.

Lamandau Regency, where Delang people live, is one of these regencies. **With a total area of 641,400 hectares, the Lamandau Regency authority issued permits to corporations covering a total area of 530,526 hectares.** Barito Utara Regency issued permits covering a total area of 1,452,468 hectares, whilst the actual size of the regency is only 830,000 hectares. Kapuas Regency issued permits for 1,761,579 hectares on a total size of 1,499,900 hectares. Gunung Mas Regency issued permits for 996,251 hectares for an actual

size of 1,080,400 hectares. Barito Timur Regency issued permits for 359,043 hectares on an actual size of 383,400 hectares. (12)

The Indonesian NGO WALHI Central Kalimantan noted that corporations control 12,7 million hectares of a total 15.3 million hectares of land - more than 80 per cent of the province. They acquired control through logging, oil palm plantation and mining concessions. (13) **Many land and forest fires started within these concession areas. In 2015 WALHI recorded 17,676 hotspots in Central Kalimantan, with the majority of those located in corporate concession areas.**

A 2008 study by Pasaribu, S.M and Friyatno Supena explained that the cause of fires in Kalimantan was associated with land clearing to establish plantations. According to the study, traditional shifting cultivation systems also contributed to land fires, although only 20 per cent. (14)

Indigenous communities as shield

The majority of land and forest fires have been located inside big companies' concessions. Yet, there is little legal persecution. WALHI Central Kalimantan noted that only 30 corporations were investigated and 10 of these cases are already closed without the companies having been held responsible. None of their cases were followed up. (15) At the national level, the central government listed 413 companies allegedly involved in a total area of 1.7 million hectares and only 14 were sanctioned. Further, WALHI explained, law enforcement has not yet touched the big actors which are involved in vast area of forest burning. Those include Wilmar Group, Best Agro International, Sinar Mas, Musimas, Minamas and Julong Group. They control land use not only through their own concessions but also through the purchase of crude palm oil from mid-size and small companies and profit from land and forest burning on these smaller companies' land. Sanctions and legal persecution are random and selective. (16) In Central Kalimantan, the big companies involved in forest burning include Sinar Mas and Wilmar. (17)

Land clearing using mechanical equipment is twice as expensive as by fires. (18) Oil palm companies employ local people to clear the land through burning. (19)

Research by Bambang Hero, a lecturer at the Forestry Department of Bogor Agriculture Institute, revealed that in 2015 many corporations employed local people to clear land using fire. **Companies are using them as a 'human shield' to prevent legal consequences from using fire to clear the land and forest.** When the team to verify fire incidence visited the site, the companies would claim that the cleared land belonged to the local community. Six months later, the very land would have changed hands to the corporation and local people who were blamed for clearing the land were nowhere to be seen. (20)

There is a systematic attempt to portray corporate crime as individual crime by **putting the blame on indigenous or local communities.** The regulation that protects local indigenous farming practices is used to shape public opinion so local customary communities are blamed for forest burning, even where the fires are a result of clearing within concession areas.

Instead of enforcing the law, the government prefers to punish indigenous communities, including the Delang people, for alleged crimes they have not committed. Central Kalimantan's regulation protecting indigenous Dayak communities' traditional farming

practices was revoked by Government regulation No.15/2015. **‘No burning’ signs were posted on every street corner.** The army and police were sent to villages to check and harass people. Those indigenous groups who continued to practice slash-and-burn farming were terrorized, **water bombs were dropped from helicopters to put out the fires used within their traditional farming systems.**

Victims are punished

The indigenous Delang community is the victim. They have been exposed to the dangerous smoke of forest and land fires that originate in the concession areas controlled by the corporations. They also have taken the brunt of the expansion of the oil palm industry, which resulted in severe economic pressure on Delang peoples and their traditional economies.

In the last 10 years, **in addition to losing land to oil palm plantations, the Delang have been exposed to economic pressure due to government policies that are not supportive to local people.** They include (1) the drop of the rubber price, (2) the appropriation of community living spaces through designation of villages into forestry areas, (3) deforestation and climate change, (4) the expansion of monoculture oil palm plantations, and (5) environmental degradation through illegal logging by companies.

Rubber is the main crop from which Delang indigenous community generates income, besides rice, dogfruit and fruits. Since the government banned the export of raw rubber, the price has fallen from 20,000 rupiah in 2009 to 5,000 – 6,000 rupiah nowadays.

The issuance of excessive permits for corporate activities resulted in high deforestation rates. Loss of forest has also changed the micro-climate, which in turn affects farming cycles, too. This complicates traditional agriculture. Prolonged rainy seasons and extreme dry seasons lead to a drop in productivity and failed harvests. Unlike before, rice harvests are no longer sufficient to live on for a year. An increase in insect outbreaks further aggravates the situation.

Before oil palm arrived in the area, rice grew well and gave a good yield. There was no insect outbreak. Now, rats and bugs attack people’s gardens and have become serious problems. Fruit trees are replaced by oil palm and bees are gone, which has led to a drop in fruit and honey production. On top of this, illegal logging is rampant in the area adjacent to the Delang land, especially after two logging companies started their operation there.

The economic situation of Delang people is dire. Many have sold their land to ease economic problems. The government is adding to the problems by banning traditional farming. **People are afraid of the police and the military in charge of enforcing the ban, and yet, in order to survive, people have to farm wherever take-over from corporate concessions has left a little space and opportunity.** Because of that, often the harvest is poor. Some dare to carry on with swidden farming. Due to these economic pressures, many have to look for work outside the villages.

Delang people have been treated unjustly. They are not the culprits of forest and land fires. They burn and clear their own fields. People’s fields are not concession land. **A field is a small plot of land, less than one hectare, whereas concession land can be hundreds to thousands of hectares in size.** Farming is for subsistence, not for profit. **There have never been large forest fires in Delang due to their traditional small farming practices.** Delang people (and Dayak peoples in general) apply a “fencing” system when practicing

shifting cultivation, guided by strict indigenous rules and hefty fines for violators. Each household can only manage one hectare of land and the burning is managed collectively. It's a significantly different practice to the way corporations use fire, where thousands of hectares of land and forests are burned without any capacity to control it.

The ban of traditional farming is not only denying people's right to food sovereignty and rights to a livelihood, but it also decimates the social and cultural fabric of indigenous communities that is connected to these farming activities. People are frustrated with the economic pressure they are facing and with the government policies that put even more pressure to them and jeopardize their livelihoods. In the end, **the Delang have decided to resist.** They will carry on with traditional swidden farming and they are ready to be put into jail together.

Sri Palupi

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Chile: Mega forest fires, corporate crime and impunity



In the south-central region of Chile, mega **forest fires have been spreading progressively, shaking the country on a regular basis. They are related to the industrial tree plantations of exotic species of pine and eucalyptus.** The last fire occurred in the summer season of 2017, and in early February, almost 600,000 hectares were recorded to have been devastated—in some parts of the O'Higgins region, all of Maule and a good part of Bio Bio. Most of **the outbreaks were started intentionally on the plantations,** and resulted in 11 deaths, 1,551 burned properties, 6,162 affected people and millions in economic and material losses, along with profound environmental damage. (1)

Three theses on the intent of the fires appeared in the public agenda. The first is related to the so-called international network of corruption, due to the profit that would be gained from the mega fires. (2) The second is a fact that has not been considered as a driving force, despite public institutions' knowledge of it: uncontrolled pests in tree plantations that were present in the areas that were devastated. (3) The third thesis is the one that certain ultra-right groups raised, related to acts of "Mapuche Terrorism." They created a false news campaign that seeks to divert responsibility from plantation companies, by accusing indigenous Mapuche communities—despite the fact that the fires this time happened in areas where there is practically no presence of Mapuche communities. (4)

Several organizations believe there is an orchestrated action with clear intent. **Most of the fire-affected areas were mainly planted with pine and eucalyptus monocultures that had been affected by pests.** (5) Some of these pests were absolutely out of control, and indeed, have been increasing throughout all of south-central Chile, as in the case of the *Sirex noctilio*, or "driller wasp." (6) This has been denounced since 2012, in the context of fire outbreaks that summer (7), which razed some 60,000 hectares and killed seven firefighters. (8) At that time, a certain group of politicians also tried to incriminate "Mapuche causes" through a media campaign, even **applying the Anti-Terrorist Law directed at indigenous Mapuche communities.** This exploited the latent historical conflicts between Mapuche communities and plantation companies who co-opted their lands—generating a serious wave of racism, intolerance, xenophobia. This context prompted a journalistic investigation and the publication of a book in 2014. (9)

There are an estimated three million hectares of tree plantations in south-central Chile, of which some 750,000 hectares correspond to CMPC's holding, whose main company is **Forestal Mininco**. Forestal Mininco, controlled by the Matte Group, has a fortune exceeding 11.5 billion dollars. The other company present concentrates over 1.2 million hectares and corresponds to the holding of Copec-AntarChile, whose main logging company is **Celco – Arauco** of the Angelini Group—which also has a fortune in the billions of dollars. Both economic groups are linked to Chile through situations of corruption, plunder, conspiracies and collusions. (10)

Logging companies have annually received billions of pesos from State coffers. In 2017, in the midst of large demonstrations, over 100 organizations stressed: **"We call on the responsible state political powers to end the forest model**. It is taking us all to an abyss, and the debacle has been progressively increasing in the midst of public institutions' ineffectiveness and forestry economic groups' political cronyism and corruption networks. Billions in taxes are annually allocated to the Country's main economic interest groups, for expenses such as: production costs; scientific research in public universities; CONAF [National Forest Corporation] firefighters to put out their fires; government forces to guard their property; road improvements because high truck traffic carrying their harvests has destroyed roads; annexing of peasants' and communities' lands in their interests; distribution of thousands of liters of water to areas experiencing water crises—located in regions with the greatest concentration of logging; biotechnology development to improve species to be more resistant to climate changes in mountainous areas or to better extract water from water tables (...) **This state plunder cannot continue.**" (11)

It is also important to consider the state resources used to **criminalize Mapuche people in the context of conflicts over ancestral lands**, mainly in the areas of Arauco, Malleco, Cautín and Los Ríos. This involves several cases of violence, including **serious acts of violence against Mapuche children**. (12)

Another factor, which is no minor matter, is that pine and eucalyptus trees are considered to be "pyrophytic" species with a high risk of combustion and propagation. **Eucalyptus trees produce a highly flammable oil**, which is why they are called "gasoline trees." **The same is true of pine trees**, given their high resin content. **In monoculture, both species have contributed to the expansion of mega fires—also caused by these plantations—in south-central Chile, in the midst of a major water crisis.** (13)

Corporate Impunity in Criminal Fires

In September 2015, several organizations—including the Network for the Defense of the Territories, the Latin American Environmental Conflict Observatory (OLCA), and student and environmental representatives—went to the National Prosecutor's office to deliver a folder with over 300 pages that document the arson, or the **relationship between the arson and mercenary groups tied to plantation company interests**. (14)

Some of the materials submitted included: testimonies from ex-guards linked to surveillance companies on forest lands; confessions by workers who were paid to commit arson and incriminate Mapuche leaders; incomplete examinations and abandoned legal cases related to forest arson and mercenary groups; former agents of the military dictatorship's intelligence

service providing surveillance services to companies; public testimonies by parliamentarians; investigative reports; and legal opinions.

They also submitted information on the relationship between plantation fires and pests; the existence of mercenary groups aimed at criminalizing and repressing the Mapuche people; and the insurance payouts and collusion among the business, political and justice sectors of the Araucanía region.

It is inconceivable that the Public Ministry has not yet established lines of inquiry to determine actions and responsibilities related to the interests of plantation companies—in particular the companies Mininco and Arauco. Instead, **with bias and racism, prosecutors have preferred to launch an open persecution of the Mapuche people.**

The organizations denounced **the direct links between justice workers and political interests linked to the plantation industry**, referring to the former Araucanía regional prosecutor, Francisco Ljubetic, and former prosecutor Luis Chamorro—who for years carried out actions that criminalized several Mapuche community members. Citing health reasons, Chamorro resigned from his position in 2014 and began providing his services as a lobbyist for the Arauco company. (15)

Following the allegations, the Prosecutor's Office decided to carry out an investigation in the Bio Bio and Araucanía regions. However, there has been no investigation to date.

Amidst the devastation caused by the mega fires in 2017, on January 31st of that year, **110 organizations submitted to the State Defense Council diverse records of precedents related to acts of arson that benefitted forest industry interests** in the Maule, Bio Bio and Araucanía regions. The Council is meant to ensure the public interest and is a significant national actor when it comes to complying with environmental legislation. Therefore, through a formal petition, the Council was requested to undertake an investigation and take legal action regarding the companies' responsibility in the forests fires. (11)

However, on February 22, 2017, the Council stated that it did "not have the investigative capacities required (...) to intervene in this matter" and added that: "the records submitted have been delivered to the Environmental Service Unit to be studied and analyzed, in order to gather more information and act according to the legal functions and faculties conferred to this Unit." The document was signed by Carlos Mackenney, acting president of the State Defense Council. (16)

It is clear to the organizations that **the State Defense Council did not want to take action because there are conflicts of interest.** These organizations denounced that Council President (Juan Ignacio Piña Rochefort) was a trusted official of former President Sebastián Piñera during his term; Piñera, in turn, has a close relationship with logging companies. The former president was a partner in Antar Chile—of the Angelini Group's forest holding—and he maintains a close relationship with the Matte Group of the Mininco logging company. It is also impossible to ignore the networks of corruption with broad sectors of the opposition and with pro-government sectors, including several officials linked to the Bachelet government and the companies. "The State Defense Council merely washed its hands [of the matter]," the organizations said.

After the fires of 2017, it was leaked in the media that the Maule Regional Prosecutor was investigating the relationship between the fires and tree plantations. In July 2017, it was reported that: "Prosecutor Mauricio Richards, in charge of the case, is investigating the relationship between this national disaster and a decree issued one month prior to the fire outbreaks. This decree was issued by the Agricultural and Livestock Service (SAG, by its Spanish acronym), which quarantined many of the pine plantations that were razed, due to an infestation of driller wasps that rendered useless hundreds of hectares—which were later affected by the fires. Suspicion falls again on the forest industry, due to the fact that insurance covers land affected by fire, but would not have been valid for damages caused by the infestation." (17)

Following the press leaks, the Prosecutor issued a public statement denying such an investigation and stating that "The investigations today are focused on other issues, which does not mean that if serious and specific allegations exist about possible wrongful insurance charges due to the presence of the wasp, they will not be investigated with the same rigor and professionalism with which all claims received by the Public Ministry are investigated." (18) The refusal to investigate confirmed the allegations that indicate **complicity between the Public Prosecutor and the companies.**

The Public Prosecutor's Office of Chile—a supposedly autonomous institution whose role is to direct investigations into crimes, bring the accused to court if necessary, and provide protection to victims and witnesses—faces accusations of being party to and an accomplice in the crimes related to plantation companies. Said accusations link its officials with the interests of these private corporations. The State Defense Council faces a similar situation. This entity prefers omissions and prefers not to fulfill its obligations, despite having the ability to do so. It has allowed crimes that were committed in the context of the mega forest fires go unpunished—crimes that have razed south-central Chile in recent years.

People are sustaining a constant resistance to the industrial forest model in several territories. In a meeting held in Temuco in May 2018, it was announced that the denouncements will continue at various political and human rights bodies, at the local and international levels, in order to put an end to the impunity.

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The Amazon: A territory in the crossfire



The Amazon—which encompasses part of what is now Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana and Suriname—is a living territory in continuous transformation, which coexists with hundreds of peoples and communities who depend on the forests.

Despite the fact that forests under indigenous territory are the best cared-for, the practices and knowledge that safeguard them continue to be marginalized and even criminalized. Fire is a key element.

Who is really burning forests in the Amazon?

Most scientists assumed that large-scale seasonal fires were unlikely in highly humid areas like the Amazon; however, events in recent years have disproven this assumption. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE by its Portuguese acronym) recorded **over 200,000 forest fires in the Brazilian Amazon in 2017 alone.** (1)

According to one of its researchers, the main reason fires spread so quickly is not the often-blamed "indigenous burning," or the droughts—which indeed are occurring more frequently and for longer periods—but **the so-called "selective logging" or "reduced-impact logging."**

This kind of logging became popular worldwide in the 1990s, as it promised timber extraction without causing the devastating effects of clear-cutting. Under this practice, also called "sustainable forest management," loggers extract only timber considered to be commercially valuable. However, recent studies show that even very low rates of extraction can lead to a loss in biodiversity, since it ends up degrading and fragmenting the forest—due not only to the logging itself but also to the creation of new roads. (2) Selective logging also affects the remaining vegetation as well as the soil, hydrological and erosion processes. (3) It also leaves sticks and other debris in its path which, when dry, become flammable. **Because this logging fragments the forest, fires spread more and more rapidly in seasons of drought.** Climate change only exacerbates this process.

Additionally, after comparing 12 years of satellite data from five Amazonian countries (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil), Dolores Armenteras, a fire and deforestation specialist in Colombia, concluded that **large-scale fires are associated with communication lines in the Amazon**. For example, in Ecuador, **hydrocarbon exploitation and the construction of roads associated with it are strongly linked to fires** and deforestation in the Amazon. (4) Researcher Carlos Porto-Goncalves, in analysing a map of the Amazon that shows roads being constructed, reflects: "traditionally continuous forest area begins to be divided into blocks of forest separated by roads. Until about 20 years ago, the roads were on the edge of the region, but now they are not only advancing upon the Amazon rainforest, they are beginning to fragment it, which causes far-reaching metabolic impacts. **Between these large roads that are fragmenting the region, —or rather, because of them—a myriad of local roads appear; these roads are contributing to a seemingly out-of-control deforestation process**, whose effects are clearly devastating at many levels: locally, regionally, nationally and globally." (5)

Selective logging and roads, however, warn us of a bigger problem.

In the colonization process of the Amazon region, a "developmentalist" intervention emerged. **This is an imposed "development" model that seeks to identify, quantify, exploit and monopolize as many "natural resources" as possible, in order to feed a capitalist market** that is ever intensifying and accelerating. The major destruction and dispossession that this intervention continues to cause in the lives of affected people and areas that are captured and contaminated is part of its inherent injustice and environmental racism. (6) This "development" **underlies the many activities that are often identified as "drivers of deforestation."** These include the timber, agriculture, livestock and pulp industries, as well as the extraction, transport and processing of fossil fuels and minerals and the proliferation of hydroelectric dams. (7) These industries in turn require roads, waterways, ports, workers' camps, etc.

It should be noted that, in many cases, **said "drivers of deforestation" burn huge areas of forest in order to make way for "development."** These fires, which are neither prohibited nor criminalized, are the cheapest and most commonly used mechanism by many of these industries.

It is also important to note that **forest fires are also a threat to indigenous territories of the Amazon**. For example, from October to December 2017, 24,000 hectares of indigenous Kayapó territory were burned in Brazil; meanwhile the indigenous Xikrin do Rio Cateté territory lost around 10,000 hectares. (8) Both territories had already suffered from the illegal logging of mahogany trees, and are still confronting the mining industry. In the case of the Xikrin territory, the logging entailed the construction of 130 kilometres of primary roads and 173 kilometres of secondary roads. (9)

Indigenous fire management

What is known as swidden, shifting or "slash and burn" agriculture, an age-old practice used by forest peoples, is almost always blamed for causing fires and deforestation. However, it is known to preserve and improve soils, stimulate the growth of certain vegetation and contribute to the protection of specific habitats. Opening up clearings in the forest and burning the remaining branches and leaves produces nutrients that enrich the soil, and also prevents larger fires in times of drought. The practice of using spaced-out plots in specific places, scales and time cycles, with long periods of rest to allow for regeneration,

demonstrates communities' important ancestral knowledge of how to respect their environment and coexist with it in a sensitive and respectful way.

Fire however plays a role that goes far beyond opening up areas for cultivation. Amazonian peoples know that dense forested areas are not very rich in fauna, and that plots left to rest become a great attraction for game animals. These scattered plots also limit the spread of pests, fungi and insects, and they encourage the growth of certain vegetation. Peoples also use fire to encourage the growth of fruit trees, create sacred spaces, control certain grasslands and fodder for domestic animals, open paths, maintain communal and living spaces, etc. **This wise use of fire has been a crucial element in the historical evolution of Amazonian diversity.**

Nonetheless, for many communities, it is no longer possible to cultivate in their places of origin—either because their lands and/or living spaces were co-opted, contaminated or expropriated under unjust policies, or because they had to escape situations of violence and criminalization. This has forced them to "adapt" cycles of shifting agriculture, rotation schedules, cultivation areas and grazing areas to much shorter time periods and more reduced spaces.

Faced with this, and using a discourse of "stopping deforestation," **conservation policies brand these age-old agricultural practices unproductive. They take advantage of the climate crisis to impose programs that claim to make communities' agriculture more "efficient."** These policies do not aim to stop logging, new roads or industries that foment the fragmentation of the rainforest. Even less, do they aim to stop the developmentalist intervention. With slogans of "climate-friendly" or "low carbon agriculture," **they seek to prohibit and criminalize the indigenous practice of using fire.** Many programs even seek to assimilate indigenous people as a cheap option in fire suppression projects.

In Roraima, Brazil, government agencies want to replace indigenous fire management practices with the use of tractors, under the slogan "technology is white, not indigenous." (10) In Canaima National Park in Venezuela, many indigenous Pemón youth have criticized the traditional use of fire, due in large part to public-private environmental education programs focused on fire control. This has caused a decline in Pemón communities' use of fire, and thus an accumulation of flammable biomass—since leaf litter is not being burned in the usual cycles. This in turn has led to an increase in large-scale forest fires during the dry season. (11)

In the few cases where the importance of local management is at least recognized, it ends up being undermined; as it is included in market or incentive mechanisms within climate change mitigation programs. In these cases, various local burning practices are included as possible activities that generate benefits on the carbon market. (12)

Failure to recognize the important role that fire plays in forests has crucial implications on the regeneration, conservation and maintenance of forests, as well as on the people who depend on them. In a respectful coexistence, fire always was and continues to be a part of life in the Amazon rainforests.

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Quito, a city in the middle of a firebelt



Ecuador, a Latin American country located in the middle of the world gets prepared every summer (the dry season) to cope with the possibility of forest fires. During the dry season (from June/July to August/September), several provinces of the country have seen thousands of hectares of native vegetation disappear due to fires, both in forests and moorlands. **The fires generally involve eucalyptus and pine tree plantations, which facilitate and intensify the fire.**

The incidence of fire depends on several factors, such as climate change, and the duration and severity of the dry season. And, according to the authorities who do not analyze the entirety of the problem, it also depends on the mood of moorland arsonists—those people for whom starting and spreading fires is appealing.

However, in order to more deeply analyze the factors involved in forest fires in Ecuador, it is also necessary to analyze the role of exotic tree plantations. Replacing native vegetation with monoculture plantations has devastating consequences on the diversity of species, water sources and soils, as well as on the interaction of local peoples with the spaces they inhabit. **Plantations thus significantly alter the known fire regimens used and managed by inhabitants.**

The situation in Ecuador is serious. According to the Ministry of the Environment, **163,000 hectares are covered with tree plantations, and there is a strong push to expand them**, particularly with species of pine, eucalyptus, teak and balsa. There is a very large budget to effect this expansion, which aims to reach approximately 500,000 hectares. These incentives mainly favor big businesses, at the expense of farmers, forests and water.

Eucalyptus trees consume excessive amounts of water. Each adult eucalyptus tree absorbs an average of 20 liters of water per day. These trees also inhibit the growth of other plant species that could act as natural fire barriers by retaining moisture. Additionally, **eucalyptus leaves do not decompose easily, but rather remain dry on the ground, providing fuel for fires.** The same is true of its bark and branches. And the essential oils in eucalyptus (and

pine), which give them their characteristic scents, are in themselves very flammable substances.

Eucalyptus trees are known as "fire-loving," because they survive forest fires, turn green again and take advantage of the disappearance of other plants—that could have competed for light and water—to grow stronger.

The Eucalyptus Trees that Surround Quito

In the case of the capital, Quito, **native vegetation was eradicated to make way for eucalyptus trees**, creating what is known as the "green belt" of the city. Despite being composed almost entirely of very old eucalyptus plantations, this "belt" has mistakenly come to be considered a forest. This is because the Ecuadorian government uses the FAO definition of forests, which allows monoculture plantations of exotic species to be considered "planted forests."

As a result, these old plantations have not been cut down or received the proper treatment to prevent them from catching fire every summer. The "green belt" is mostly made up of almost 8,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations, which predominate on the hillsides of Pichincha, and in Píntag, Nono, Conocoto, Alangasí, Amaguaña, La Merced, Pifo, Calacalí, El Quinche and Yaruquí. (1)

The major problem with the plantations surrounding Quito is that their contribution to forest fires increases over time. The impacts caused in 20 years are very different from the impacts caused in 30 or 40 years, because as time elapses, the environmental impacts are magnified. Abandoned plantations become wild; that is, the trees—either by rhizomes or seeds—begin to reproduce themselves, and the new seedlings occupy firewall ditches. The density of the plantation thus increases, leading to a greater accumulation of leaf litter available to spread fires. Tall, thin trees—which occur due to the density of the plantation and the fact that they must compete for sunlight—quickly and easily ignite and spread fires.

Flora and fauna are severely affected by the forest fires that surround Quito. Their restoration, if it is possible, could take a long time. Furthermore, **forest fires trigger other impacts**, such as the emission of gases and smoke containing ozone, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, sulfur dioxide, particulate matter and other substances that cause serious impacts on air quality and harm the health of the exposed population.

Fires are therefore also a problem with a social impact, **involving the physical, psychological and economic integrity of the people affected.** In their wake, fires suffocate a large number of people, and destroy goods; this causes an immediate economic imbalance in affected people, **who generally live in the most impoverished and vulnerable areas of the city.**

A Radical Change

If one adds to the above the extreme climatic variations that stem from climate change, **the pressing need to make radical changes to restore forests** is obvious. This involves analyzing the underlying causes of the fires. In conditions of intense drought and high temperatures, native forests—due to their natural stratification in four levels (subsoil,

herbaceous, shrub, arboreal)—retain more moisture, propagating less fire than exotic species plantations, which only have one level and a large amount of dry organic material at ground level. The former mayor of Quito admitted this in 2017, after the fires that occurred that year. Yet apparently, every summer we start from scratch.

Some forest fires are the result of human activity: arson, burning garbage, badly-extinguished fires, or even bad faith actions that must be thoroughly investigated. But **old and recent public policies also create the conditions for these occurrences**, such as replacing native forests with tree plantations, or prioritizing reforestation with exotic trees, thinking only about short-term revenues.

Consequently, **a ban must be declared on the expansion of exotic tree plantations**. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to radically change the Ministry of Agriculture's productive matrix, the Incentive program for Climate Resilient Commercial Reforestation, and the Ministry of Environment's "Zero Deforestation" program, which considers that a hectare of logged forest may be substituted or replaced with a hectare of exotic tree monocultures. According to their logic, this would result in net "zero deforestation."

A rethinking of forest management, to gradually modify areas that have been repopulated with pine and eucalyptus toward native formations, is essential. Prioritizing the restoration of ecosystems native to each area is essential. This should take place using a *minga* approach, with the participation of people and communities near the affected areas.
(2)

Different citizen voices are demanding that the ecological and social crisis that we are experiencing be treated through holistic measures. These could include community monitoring to prevent fires, adequate management of watersheds and streams, training in forest fire prevention in vulnerable areas, urban policies aimed at increasing the porosity of city soils, and waste-reduction campaigns in urban and rural areas, such as the "Zero Waste" proposal. (3) All of this should be part of an integrated State policy to prevent forest fires and other disasters.

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Acción Ecológica

(1) <http://revistas.usfq.edu.ec/index.php/avances/article/view/134/136>

(2) The word "minga" comes from the Quechua indigenous language, and refers to collective work that is done to benefit the entire community.

(3) Workshops on "Zero Waste": <http://www.accionecologica.org/component/content/article/2213-basura>

Portugal: 28 years ago a village fought against eucalyptus. The land never burned again



On March 31, 1989, 800 people gathered in Veiga do Lila, a small village in Valpaços, and they led one of the largest environmental protests that has taken place in Portugal.

Seven or eight villages in a hidden transmontane valley had organized the action. Only later did ecologists join the cause. One afternoon, they all went to **destroy 200 hectares of eucalyptus** that a pulp company was planting on the Ermeiro farm, the largest agricultural property in the region.

The National Republican Guard (GNR, by its Portuguese acronym) was waiting for them. Two hundred police officers formed a first line of defense, aiming to impede the young trees from being torn out. But there were too few of them for such a large uprising.

The tension would escalate over the course of the afternoon. "For a moment I thought that things could be derailed," says António Morais today, one of the leaders of the protests. But the press was also present, and to this day, António believes this was the reason the violence did not escalate. There were some weapons—rocks on one side, batons on the other, but **nothing that managed to silence the men and women, young and old people, calling out: "Yes to olive trees yes, No to eucalyptus!"**

"We did not want to all burn here"

A couple months before the riot, António Morais, owner of several hectares of olive trees in Lila, noticed that **a subsidiary company of Soporcel was preparing to replace 200 hectares of olive trees with eucalyptus for the paper industry. (1)** "They had received a non-repayable grant from the State to reforest the valley [that is, a contribution with no obligation to pay it back], without even consulting the population," he continues indignantly, 28 years later.

"At that point, the Ministry of Agriculture fought tooth and nail to plant eucalyptus." Álvaro Barreto, owner of that portfolio, had been president of Soporcel's board of directors years before, and he would return to office in 1990, shortly after the people of Valpaços faced up to him.

"The prevailing thesis of the governments of Cavaco Silva was that **it was urgent to replace smallholdings and subsistence agriculture with more profitable monocultures**, that it was necessary to make forests profitable on a large scale," says António Morais. Eucalyptus promised an easy solution. **Indeed, in a few years Portugal would gain a prominent role in the pulp industry.**

"I began to read things and realized that eucalyptus would bring us major problems," continues António Morais. "For one, this is a region where water is anything but abundant, so **we would have big problems with the viability of other crops**—especially olive trees, which have always been this village's wealth. And then there were the fires, which were hell. **Eucalyptus trees are highly flammable and reach a great height.**"

In the warm transmontane land, there are eight months of winter per year and four months of hell. **The fire, he was sure, would come with those trees.**

He began to talk about his fears with other people from the valley. "Slowly, a consensus began to build: that the easy profit from eucalyptus would be our downfall in the medium term. **We did not want to let our land dry up. And we did not want to all burn up. We had to destroy that plantation, at any cost.**"

Anatomy of the Resistance

The nucleus consisted of a dozen and a half farmers who were able to mobilize the rest. "On Sundays we went to the villages, and when mass ended we explained to people what could happen to our land," recalls Natália Esteves—descendant of a family of large producers of olive oil—who was suddenly transformed into a leader of the protest. "And we also went door-to-door to inform people who had not been in the assemblies."

At first there were doubts, because the wood would always be worth more than olives, and chestnuts were not yet worth what they are today. "But we always tried to focus the conversation on what would happen within a few years, saying that **the eucalyptus trees would dry up the land, people would be hostage to a single crop**, and that if anything bad happened, they would be left with nothing."

What scared people most, however, was fire. "Where there is eucalyptus, everything burns. And so people no longer called these trees by their name, but **called them matches.**"

At that time, João Sousa was president of the Veiga do Lila council. Today, at 86 years old and with the agility of a 30 year old, he quickens his pace to show the area that could have become a box of matches. "Look, there is not a single eucalyptus planted. And our valley has not burned in over 30 years."

The Portuguese forest tragedy of recent decades indicates that indeed, they were right many years ago, when the government and authorities told them otherwise. "We are people from the countryside, without education or knowledge, but we knew how to defend our land" says the old man.

The War

The people's first struggles to tear out the eucalyptus trees were clandestine, disorganized attacks. Two weeks before the war, on Palm Sunday, things intensified. "We gathered

together two hundred people from the villages, and the company's owners called the GNR," recalls António Morais. "When they arrived we had already uprooted some 50 hectares of eucalyptus." That day people fled, but they warned that they would return after Easter.

On March 31, 1989, the Sunday after Easter, the entire population would gather in Veiga do Lila to tear out what remained of the eucalyptus plantation. The village was packed with journalists, and there was even a helicopter covering the events from the air. It was not necessary to use shovels or hoes, given that the eucalyptus trees had been planted shortly before and could be pulled out by hand. The police tried to form a line of defense, but two hundred police officers were not enough for all those people.

In one hour, 180 hectares of small trees were uprooted. A dozen police officers rode out on horses in a show of strength, but it did not work. Soporcel had built terraces to plant the eucalyptus trees, and now the animals could not go down them.

All For One

The special police force was now advancing downhill with shields and helmets. José Oliveira, a farmer from the small village of Émeres, tried to escape off to one side, but was soon caught by the police. He had a revolver in his pocket, and that was what complicated the situation. "He was taken into custody and put in a van for illegal possession of a gun," tells his now widow, Ester.

That detention would mark the beginning of the end of the war. "People had retreated in the face of this intervening force, but when they realized that one of our people had been captured, they began to shout that they would not move until he was released," says António Morais. Ester says: "It was the whole valley that saved my man." Now they were not using rocks anymore, but shouts—to let Uncle Zé go free, and quickly.

A dozen protest organizers would be called to court, and one year later, they faced charges of invasion of private property and were convicted with a suspended sentence.

"Some engineers from Soporcel came to say that they would withdraw the complaint if we promised not to destroy a new eucalyptus plantation. I told them that that was unthinkable, that we would never have those trees in our valley." In the following nights, almost every remaining tree was covertly torn out.

Soporcel would end up giving up and selling the property.

Today, the Ermeiro farm is a land of walnut, almond, olive and pine trees. It has never burned. On that 31st of March 1989, the people united, and as they now say, they saved themselves. "We were right," they repeat again and again. They all repeat it.

This article is a summary of Ricardo J. Rodrigues' report, published in the magazine, "Noticias Magazine" in October 2017. Read the full text (in Portuguese) here:

<https://www.noticiasmagazine.pt/2017/valpacos-luta-eucalipetos/>

(1) Soporcel merged with the company Portucel, to form the Portucel Soporcel Group, and later became part of the Portuguese paper manufacturing company, The Navigator Company.

Other struggles

Peru: forest inhabited by the indigenous Shawi to be handed over to Canadian mining firm



In October 2017, the Geological, Mining and Metallurgical Institute of Peru (INGEMMET), an office that forms part of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and which is responsible for mining applications and rights, began processing eight mining license requests, seven for an area of 1,000 hectares each, and one for an area of 900 hectares. The total area covers **8,900 hectares and is located in the midst of a tropical rainforest, home to the indigenous Shawi people**. The aforementioned requests were made by the Peruvian company Minerals Camino Real Perú S.A.C, which is owned by **Canadian firm Royal Road Minerals Limited**. The same Canadian mining company also runs projects in Nicaragua and Colombia for the extraction of copper, iron but primarily gold. (1)

In February 2018, the **Barrick Gold Corporation**, Canada's leading gold mining company, purchased around 12.5% of the shares of Royal Road Minerals Limited. (2)

Barrick Gold Corporation is the world's leading gold mining company, following years of an aggressive acquisitions strategy. It has 20 thousand employees (including consortiums or joint ventures), 27 operating mines, 10 projects under development and the industry's largest reserves of gold. Barrick has on-going projects in the United States, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia and Zambia.

In Peru, Barrick has two mining operations - Lagunas Norte and Pierina. Lagunas Norte, located in the department of La Libertad in the Andes, is an open-pit mine that began operations in 2005. To obtain the gold, an 11 meter borehole is drilled and then loaded with explosives to fragment the rock. More than 200 thousand metric tons of ore and waste are extracted each day! The Pierina mine in the department of Ancash, is located between 3,800 and 4,200 meters a.s.l., and is also an open-pit mine that uses drills to penetrate 10.5 meters into the rock to access the precious metal. Both mines use a process in which sodium

cyanide is dissolved in water, along with other toxic chemicals, to separate the gold and silver contained in the extracted ore.

Barrick currently controls more than 145,000 hectares between these two mines, and also owns the Irene I-500 mine in Ancash. The Andean Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations (CAOI) ensures that **Barrick does not pay any royalties in Peru** due to Guarantee Contracts and Measures for Investment Promotion, also known as legal, tax and administrative stability contracts. In terms of social and environmental conflicts, and according to the Ombudsman's Office, as of May 2017 there were 123 active socio-environmental conflicts registered, of which 64.6% were caused by mining activities. **The biggest complaint of local inhabitants is the constant contamination from the mines and the plundering of their water sources.**

Mining exploration and indigenous resistance

In December 1997, INGEMMET published the document "Geology of the Balsapuerto and Yurimaguas Quadrangles." (3) The study was carried out by a group of experts commissioned by the Ministry of Energy and Mines of Peru, with the objective of encouraging and promoting mining exploitation in the aforementioned districts. The document included the following text: **"Archaeological evidence has been reported in the study area that consists of** petroglyphs that are likely to represent cultural or religious symbols of the ancient inhabitants of the zone (District of Balsapuerto). These drawings are perfectly circular and elongated and their true meaning is now the subject of detailed research."(4)

This discovery by Western researchers regards something that the Shawi indigenous people have maintained secret for many years. Subsequent research has since determined that the Shawi people call the rock where the petroglyphs are engraved "Cumpanamá" in reference to a religious divinity. Recent studies have since identified and recorded 50 other pre-Hispanic archaeological sites (5), which unfortunately have so far neither been mapped nor registered in the public records: neither has any administrative process been undertaken with the Ministry of Culture to officially recognize these sites. **The Shawi make up almost 95% of the population of the Balsapuerto district**, and mainly live in the department of Loreto, alongside the Cahuapana, Sillay, Supayacu Paranapura, Cachiyacu and Shanusi rivers. From a demographic point of view, the Shawi are among the eight largest indigenous groups resident in Peru.

The Shawi believe that the world is oval like a wasps hive and that it is covered by an immense blue mantle, inside which the moon, the sun and the stars circulate. The land is surrounded by water and the places where people live were initially only water held up by the sky. According to the cosmivision of the Shawi, in the upper space resides the Sun (Pi'i) and it is from here that Mashi and Cumpanamá, the main divinities of the Shawi, originated. Cumpanamá formed the earth and the rivers, transformed the wood dust of cedars into fish, and leaves into land animals and birds, and taught the Shawi how to fish and make canoes. The cultivation of crops, hunting and other activities were taught to the Shawi by Mashi. **This is a rich culture, full of stories typical of ancient peoples, and underlining their intrinsic and unique relationship with their environment.**

In 2009, Shawi leaders called for national protests to defend their lands. This was a unique manifestation of indigenous resistance, which underlined the unequal struggle of overpowering political forces with those who are weakest, in this case, the indigenous

minority. **The great Shawi nation demonstrated its capacity for organization with a march of around five thousand protesters** to the Yurimaguas-Tarapoto highway. The president at the time, Alan García, described the native peoples as "second class citizens," while also promoting a package of laws in the Peruvian Congress related to land tenure. García argued that such laws were necessary in order to implement the Free Trade Agreement that Peru had signed with the United States. **On 5 June 2009, a tragedy struck that shook the whole country.** Known as the "Bagua Massacre," **at least 33 people were killed** in clashes between indigenous communities and the armed forces. The indigenous leaders, with a large group of Shawis, believed that if they didn't stand their ground they would forfeit their land. With much trepidation they took the decision not to fall back, returning for a second day of protests. **Six thousand came back willing to defend what many who study social conflicts simply don't understand: "indigenous people are the land and the land is formed of indigenous people" - an indivisible and unbreakable union. If the land dies, the native people die, and if the native people die, nature dies.** At the time, the indigenous people and those in the local population who supported them were the only ones who could ensure that the decrees being sought to facilitate the take-over of indigenous lands would all fail.

This long tradition of resistance to cultural invasion and the occupation of indigenous territories, underlines the strength of such peoples' deep-rooted connection to the land, the forest and life. "The official history of our Amazonia is a partial history, written to praise the conquerors, adventurers, travelers and colonizers. Indigenous groups are reduced to ethnological "Objects of study," within a simplistic approach that only offers an anonymous and passive viewpoint of conquest and dispossession. (6) **On innumerable occasions, however, indigenous peoples have shown that they are neither submissive nor indifferent: quite the opposite in fact.**

The prior consultation that never happened: imposition and struggle

The indigenous resistance also led to the passing of the celebrated Law of Prior Consultation No. 29785, which is based on ILO Convention 169, to which the Peruvian State is a signatory party. The aim was that such events would not be repeated.

However, a legal sidestep is contained in the Regulations for Prior Consultation. Article 1 states that **the result of the consultation process is NOT BINDING, except in those aspects where agreement exists between the parties.** It is clear then the direction and use intended for this piece of legislation, today reflected in the mining request to develop 8,900 hectares of land.

The plan for the so-called "Timo" mining project is focused on the district of Balsapuerto. This area is covered with primary forests. It also contains the Cachiyacu basin, the waters of which descend from the nearby Sub-Andean foothills and flow into the Paranapura River on its right bank. The watercourse then joins the Huallaga River close to the city of Yurimaguas.

Balsapuerto is located between the boundary of the lowland tropical forest or Amazon plain and the mountainous terrain of the sub-Andean or Cahuapanas range. The flora here represents the most notable living expression of the Amazonian ecosystems of the humid tropics, forming an extensive and continuous dense forest, with trees that rise up to 30 meters in height. The variety of animal species is atypical, due to the mountainous

ecosystems (or high tropical forest) that are associated by position and proximity to the Amazonian plain proper (or lowland forest). **These forests consist of communities holding legal titles and represent the ancestral lands of the Shawi, who depend on them for their livelihoods and sustenance. Any interference to the basin headwaters by the mining project would also have a detrimental impact on nearby urban settlements.**

To date, no environmental impact study has been undertaken in relation to the Timo mining submission, and nor has any consultation been made with the local population or authorities. The Governor of the Loreto region, Fernando Meléndez Celis, has stated that he will not authorize or provide a single inch of land to the Balsapuerto project. The mayor of the district of Balsapuerto, Magno Savedra Cachique, has already held two press conferences to declare opposition to the project in the Balsapuerto district, and also stated that the municipality had received no prior information regarding the issue. (7) The legal advisor to the municipality is now pressing for criminal charges to be brought against the INGEMMET officials who processed the mining request.

Civil society organizations in the province of Alto Amazonas have voiced their concern about this issue and have been organizing joint actions with indigenous leaders and organizations representing the Shawi indigenous people of Balsapuerto. The Catholic Church has also expressed deep concern through its Land Pastoral program, which is sponsored by the Apostolic Vicariate of Yurimaguas. Local press and radio have been widely reporting the issue, especially to the inhabitants of Yurimaguas. The Rtv Total community radio station, which runs a Spanish-Shawi bilingual service, has also been transmitting in-depth reports. The El Menguare newspaper has been reporting in the city of Yurimaguas and in the district of Balsapuerto.

Mining concessions and operating permits have not yet been issued. It therefore remains for the central government, through the Ministry of Energy and Mines, to listen to the voice of the local people, including the Shawi communities, and veto the mining applications. **Can a Canadian mining company once again impose a project that would destroy almost 9,000 hectares of rain forests on which the Shawi people and other adjacent villages depend, and without their consent, or even that of the local authorities?**

Alain A. Salas Dávila.

Independent indigenous leader

Consultant to Indigenous Organizations of the Peruvian Amazon

(1) Projects in Nicaragua; <https://www.royalroadminerals.com/projects/nicaragua> and in Colombia:

<https://www.royalroadminerals.com/projects/colombia>

(2) <https://globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/01/24/1304286/0/en/Barrick-Announces-Investment-in-Royal-Road-Minerals-Limited.html>

(3) <http://repositorio.ingemmet.gob.pe/handle/ingemmet/61>

(4) Archaeological Appendix, page 2001

(5) Bustamante et. al., 2013, What the stones reveal, Cumpamaná and the petroglyphs of Balsapuerto, Lima, Peru

(6) Morey Alejo, Humberto and Gabel Daniel Sotil García. " HISTORICAL PANORAMA OF THE PERUVIAN AMAZON: an Amazonian perspective," Provincial Municipality of Maynas, Iquitos, 2000

(7) AIDía Peru news channel, interview with Magno Saavedra, mayor of Balsapuerto, and Shawi indigenous leaders Agustín Lancha Pizango and Francisco Tangoa. May 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYZ2pjhFy8s>

ACTION ALERTS

Bolloré Loses Court Case in France

In 2016, a TV station in France (Channel 2) aired a report that told the story of Vincent Bolloré, a businessman who heads the oil palm plantation company, Bolloré, a subsidiary of the multinational company, Socfin. The television report showed the social and environmental abuses committed in Cameroon by the company, Socapalm, another subsidiary of Socfin. Vincent Bolloré owns 38.7% of the shares of Socfin. In a clear intimidation strategy, the businessman decided to take the journalist to court on charges of defamation. In early June, 2018, the criminal court of Nanterre, France, ruled that there was no defamation in the news report, and on the contrary, congratulated the journalist's boldness and independent work.

Read the note (in French): <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/28193-vincent-bollore-perd-un-nouveau-proces-de-presse-en-france>

Tanzania: call for international support to stop intimidation against Maasai villagers as they take the government to court

A report from Oakland Institute documents in detail the many rights abuses faced by the Maasai in the Ngorongoro and Loliondo regions of Tanzania. In recent years, hundreds of Maasai homes have been burned and tens of thousands of people evicted from their land in the name of conservation and safari tourism. Maasai from four villages in Loliondo sued the government of Tanzania in September 2017 for the right to return to their villages which have become part of a safari park. But, according to the Pan African Lawyers Union and the Oakland Institute, the government is intimidating and criminalizing villagers and ally NGOs to leave the case. Community members involved are calling for international attention in their hopes that it will force the government to cease its abuses and allow the legal case to move forward. Read the report here: <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/tanzania-safari-businesses-maasai-losing-serengeti> And a press release from the Oakland Institute after the intimidation and arrests here: <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/maasai-face-intimidation-arrests-take-tanzanian-gov-cou>

RECOMMENDED

Declaration from Sena Madureira, Brazil: “We carry forward the spirit of union among peoples, and opposition to capitalism's “solutions”

From June 15-17, 2018, indigenous peoples and communities that live and work in forests gathered in Sena Madureira, Acre, to denounce the false solutions to environmental and climatic degradation that green capitalism proposes. They denounced projects that buy into the fallacy that it is possible to continue polluting the earth, water and atmosphere in one part of the planet, and “offset” this pollution by conserving forests in another region. In addition to this impossibility, these measures end up harming populations who actually interact with forests in a balanced way. The state of Acre is considered to be a “laboratory” for these “offset” policies, and traditional communities there have been suffering due to these projects. Read the document drawn up at the meeting in Sena Madureira: <https://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/brazil-sena-madureira-declaration-june-17-2018/>

Forest Fires in Portugal: When Corporate Power Kills

An article by Transparency International shows how the political establishment of Portugal—which should be managing the forest, territorial planning, and firefighting and prevention measures—is held hostage to influential business interests. According to the article, this explains why so many people die and so much area is destroyed by fires year after year. Among the most powerful groups is the pulp and paper industry, and their production depends on monoculture plantations of eucalyptus, which are estimated to cover almost one million hectares. The Navigator Company holds a position of dominance in the country, and it is involved in all stages of production. Read the article (in Portuguese) here:

<https://www.nexojornal.com.br/ensaio/2017/Inc%C3%AAndios-em-Portugal-quando-os-lobbies-matam>

Cambodia: hydroelectric dam plan could kill the Mekong River

A Chinese-backed plan to build Cambodia's biggest dam could "literally kill" the Mekong river, according to a confidential government assessment seen by the newspaper The Guardian, which says that the proposed site at Sambor is the "worst possible place" for hydropower. The newspaper article states that dire impacts are predicted on river dolphins and one of the world's largest migrations of freshwater fish, which in turn affect the many fisher villages that depend upon this river basin. The Mekong sustains the livelihood of 60 million people and 80 per cent of Cambodians count on fish as their main source of protein. Read the article here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/16/leaked-report-warns-cambodias-biggest-dam-could-literally-kill-mekong-river>

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The Bulletin aims to support and contribute to the struggle of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities over their forests and territories. Subscription is free.

Monthly Bulletin of the World Rainforest Movement

This Bulletin is also available in French, Spanish and Portuguese

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