

'Green desert' monoculture forests spreading in Africa and South America

Demand for paper is driving the growth of monoculture forests in Africa and South America, hitting local communities and biodiversity

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Artificial single-species forests are expanding fast in countries of the developing South, fuelled by low production costs and incentives from governments, and causing severe social and environmental impacts, warned experts from around the world who met last week in the Uruguayan capital.

The so-called "green deserts" are encroaching on the fertile soil of South America and other regions, with the proliferation of plantations of fast-growing and high water-demanding trees to be used to produce pulp and paper, and for other industrial uses, displacing local communities and threatening native ecosystems.

Many governments in the global South support this model of investment, production and consumption, which is replicated from the North, said the participants in the International Symposium on Forestation, held Wednesday Sep. 21, the International Day of Struggle against Tree Plantations.

"Some 350 kg of paper per person a year are consumed in Europe, half of which is packaging, while in Brazil and Uruguay the average is 50 kgs per person annually," Brazilian activist Winfridus Overbeek, international coordinator of the Uruguay-based World Rainforest Movement (WRM), told IPS.

Overbeek said that in Europe as well as North America, there is no longer enough space to plant the trees required for that high level of consumption, so companies are shifting production to countries of the developing South.

He also pointed to the different opportunities found by transnational corporations in the developing world, where fertile land abounds and production costs and wages are lower than in the industrialised North.

In several countries of Latin America, as well as in southern Africa and in Asia, monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantations are advancing, to supply paper pulp factories. Plantations of oil palm, first established in Indonesia, are also expanding in those areas.

Meanwhile, "to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis, false solutions to protect the planet have been created," said Overbeek. "The production of biofuels, produced with palm oil, for example, is promoted, even though the processing and transportation releases into the atmosphere the same amount of carbon that it is supposed to reduce."

Moreover, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), one of the "flexibility" mechanisms defined in the Kyoto Protocol, allows developed countries to continue emitting greenhouse

gases while investing in projects that supposedly boost local development and cut emissions in the developing world as offsets for their own polluting.

"One of those activities is, precisely, planting trees on a large scale," Overbeek complained.

Guadalupe Rodríguez, a member of the Germany-based Rainforest Rescue, told IPS that "monoculture forests tend to be seen as a good thing, because they are green and pretty. But if you approach them, you won't hear a single bird, because there is nothing there, just silence.

"A monoculture forest is almost like a stone quarry," she added. "In tropical rainforests, by contrast, you hear animals, water flowing, because they are full of life."

Brazil is a prime example of how the expansion of plantation forests affects local communities.

There are currently around seven million forested hectares in Brazil, mainly eucalyptus, in plantations "concentrated in the country's most fertile and populous regions," Overbeek said.

"We estimate that 50,000 families who used to make a living from farming have been displaced from the countryside for that reason in the southeastern state of Espírito Santo," where the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) already has 10 settlements.

"They went into the eucalyptus growing areas, cut down trees, and built themselves houses, to say: 'we need this land to survive'," the WRM coordinator said. "And on Mar. 8, the MST brought 1,500 women together to cut down eucalyptus trees and grow food, and today, six months later, there are beans and corn growing in an area that was a monoculture forest."

Overbeek added that, because Brazil has been governed by left-wing presidents since 2003, unlike in the past "they no longer send in the police to combat the occupations of land; fortunately that kind of violence isn't happening now."

But communities that resist the thirsty plantation forests do face repression in other developing countries. "There have been murders of people who were involved in resistance struggles," Rodríguez said.

She cited, for example, the case of a Guatemalan peasant woman who was killed for opposing the expansion of sugar cane and oil palm plantations in the northern province of Alta Verapaz. The impact of forest plantations on grasslands and prairies and on water is another serious problem.

Philip Owen, founder of Geosphere, a South Africa-based environmental pressure group, described to IPS the negative experience in Mpumalanga region in the northeast of that country, where eucalyptus and pine plantations have dried up groundwater, streams and rivers.

The other major impact is on biodiversity. Monoculture plantations spell out death for grasslands, because light, which is essential for the prairie to grow, is blocked out, he said.

He also explained that native grasslands act like a sponge, absorbing rain and moisture so that it infiltrates into the ground, and their disappearance can lead to flooding and soil erosion.

The companies planting the artificial forests in Mpumalanga, Owen said, are also killing off animals like baboons, which damage the trees in the plantations in their search for food. He said some 3,000 baboons have been slaughtered in the last 10 years in South Africa.

The case of Uruguay is similar to that of South Africa. The environmental experts who came to Uruguay for the symposium visited two areas with different and opposite models of production.

"On one hand, we saw the work carried out by local residents in Cerro Alegre, in the southwestern department (province) of Soriano, which over the last 10 years has suffered from a shortage of water due to industrial deforestation in the area that is affecting 100 families," Elizabeth Díaz, with the Uruguayan environmental organisation Guayubira, told IPS.

"We also visited the city of Tarariras, in the neighbouring department of Colonia, where a number of families make a living from agriculture thanks to a diversified production model. It's an example of how to live and work in the countryside, when there are no monoculture forests," she said.

Díaz said the environmentalists who met in Montevideo reached the conclusion that "the production model based on large-scale monoculture is the same throughout the developing world, with very similar impacts on communities and the environment."

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