

Women, Communities and Plantations in Ecuador: Testimonials on a Socially and Environmentally Destructive Forestry Model

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World Rainforest Movement, Uruguay, 2008, www.wrm.org.uy

review by GRAIN

Over the last 20 years the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) has been documenting the impact of monoculture tree plantations in countries throughout the world and supporting local struggles against them. For some time it has been focusing on Ecuador, because this country brings together some of the most serious problems created by such plantations. Ecuador has plantations of the types of tree used most commonly in the world (eucalyptus, pine and oil palm), as well as monocultures of tropical species. It has plantations that serve as “carbon sinks” and plantations with Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. Communities have been severely affected. (Prior to this book, WRM had already published two studies on Ecuador.)

This book dashes the hopes of those who believed that the election to the presidency in 2006 of the left-of-centre politician, Rafael Correa, would lead to real advances on the environmental front. After all, Correa said he was committed to constructing a “new form of socialism, appropriate for the 21st century”. Although he has taken some interesting initiatives in other areas, Correa has done nothing to halt the advance of the monoculture plantations: in February 2008 he approved Executive Decree 931, which paves the way for the implementation of the National Forestation and Reforestation Plan. Among other measures, this plan commits the government to providing tax incentives and financial resources for the establishment of 750,000 hectares of commercial monoculture tree plantations.

This book provides ample evidence of the damage caused by this kind of monoculture. One of the people

interviewed said: “When I was little, we made a living by grazing animals and growing crops. But now all the native trees and medicinal plants have been lost. There are none left. There used to be little springs but everything is gone. Even in the big rivers the water level has dropped, and some of them have dried up.” Another interviewee commented: “Before, we had everything: native forests for firewood, grass for the animals. Now we can’t grow grass and food like we used to. Within 50 metres of the pines nothing grows. The land doesn’t produce anything.” Because of the dry conditions, many plantations face the threat of fire. Most are located at high altitudes where there are strong winds and, when a fire breaks out, the wind fans the flames and spreads the fire.

When the first plantations were established, the authorities made so many promises about the advantages that they would bring that some local communities organised *mingas*, a form of collective action involving men, women and children, and worked for free to prepare the land. Now that people know what these plantations bring in their wake, the mood of the communities has radically changed. Some residents even admit to have considered arson, although there is no evidence that it has actually occurred.

This book looks, in particular, at the impact of the plantations on the indigenous women of the Andean highland plains. In the past, these women carried out small-scale subsistence farming, with which they were not only able to meet their own families’ food needs, but could also sell or barter their surplus crops. The plantations have destroyed these local economic systems. Food sovereignty has been damaged



Cloud forest on the western slopes of the Andes, near Mindo, Ecuador

Photo: Jua Kill/Sinks Watch, from www.wrm.org.uy

and families have become more dependent on cash earned by men outside the communities.

The plantations have also seriously harmed the communities’ spiritual life. To quote the book: “When the water and vegetation of the highland plains vanished, they took with them the spirits who inhabited the forests and springs, the myths, legends and rituals that gave life meaning and purpose. The plantations marked the end of peace, water and fertile land, and replaced them with violence, destruction and erosion.”

The model of large-scale plantations has not yet been completely consolidated. There is still time for the Correa government to listen to what people on the ground are saying and give them the chance to build an alternative. To quote the book again: “Women can play a key role in this process. Not only are they the ones who can most clearly see everything they have lost since the arrival of the plantations; they are also the ones with the greatest desire and need to seek alternatives. Not to return to the past, but rather to build a future that ensures the conservation of resources and improves the quality of life of everyone – women and men alike.”