

When “sustainability” requires armed protection



What we see in this image clearly shows the huge gap between reality of life in Mapuche territories due to forestry activities and the statements full of decoration and certificates that forestry companies insist showing off to society.

If we pay attention to detail, this strong contingent of highly armed Chilean military police is protecting a productive activity that has been declared as ‘sustainable’ in a thousand ways. It is about Chilean forestry activity, a model imposed during the military dictatorship, which has economically favoured large Chilean forestry corporations, which today are among the most powerful forestry and pulp companies in the world.

At the very least it is striking or strange that an activity that has been self-recognised as sustainable nationally and internationally, mainly through forest management certification, has so much opposition that it needs an armed guard of such a magnitude and very far removed from any sort of result that might be caused by an activity that is formally understood as sustainable.

In this respect, it is worth examining various aspects that intervene in this situation. First of all, since its creation in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development presented to the United Nations General Assembly in 1987, the concept of sustainability presents an approach that from a western point of view would seem to be revolutionary and new, especially after the environmental crisis of the 70’s and 80’s caused by the type of economic development carried out by developed countries. This approach suggests that there is a pressing need to revise and reconsider the relationship between humanity and nature. However, this change of perspective is primarily due to the societal recognition that the extractive capitalist model is highly destructive for all life forms on the planet; and secondly the recognition that indigenous cultures have their own tools and ways of development that allow them to maintain their peoples’ lives and cultures without putting at risk the life of the planet.

On the other hand, it is easy to understand that the indiscriminate and abusive use of the sustainability concept is today one of the tools that supports the Chilean forestry model. Notably, the Forestry Sector Trade Association CORMA (which brings together the main forestry companies in the country corresponding to more than 85% of all exports derived from large-scale exotic (tree) plantations), presents itself as an organisation committed to sustainable development, even if one of its main roles is to promote timber from non-native plantations as the primary product from the Chilean forestry sector. This is a basic contradiction if we consider that forestry plantations that promote this association are based on a production model that is intensive, expansive and at such a large scale that it generates well documented serious externalities for society in general and the Mapuche people in particular.

Complementing the sustainability concept as a tool of abuse, forest companies and public institutions have organised themselves into a grouping that seeks to create widespread public concern about caring for “forests”, known as “Forests for Chile” (*Bosques para Chile*); without mentioning of course that the so called “forests” are in reality the non-native pine and eucalyptus forestry plantations, which strictly speaking are industrial crops of immense proportions that are far from being a complex forest system, as understood by the ecological sciences. This organisation, consisting of a variety of bodies, both public and private, seeks to create awareness about how to take care of forests. The striking thing is that the organisation doesn’t differentiate between real forests, in particular complex, diverse, native forests that generate benefits through cultural, social and ecosystem systems, and exotic tree plantations cultivated, managed and harvested under intensive regimes, and whose main criterion is to optimize the economic benefits at the lowest possible cost. These sorts of plantations are known as planted forests according to the FAO, which is clearly seeking to influence and confuse the public, making them believe that forest plantations are forests. This is a clear manipulation of information using the media and other means of communication.

According to official figures from CONAF, forestry companies have faced a growing wave of forest fires in the last two decades. During the summers of 1990 and 1991 there were 884 fires, affecting an area of 1,584 hectares of forest plantations. An increase in these events is quite worrying for the forestry sector. During 2014 and 2015 the number of fires reached 3,360 incidents, with an affected plantation area of 34,378 hectares. This is a clear indication of the strong resistance that these plantations generate in important sections of society. It is clear that all the efforts made in order to improve the image of the Chilean forestry sector, based on the model of large-scale industrial crops of exotic species, have not had an effect on the population.

Why does this model that uses the sustainability concept so lavishly generate such unease in society? The answer is quite simple: precisely because it is not sustainable.

First, because the property of forest companies is based on violent processes of dispossession and usurpation, exercised by the same forestry companies directly during the process against the agrarian reform carried out during the military dictatorship, as well as through the legal purchase of land, where property was previously legalised following evictions and usurpations carried out by

both Chilean and foreign settlers in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. All these processes are widely documented. At the moment, this situation places forestry companies in the middle of an intense political and social debate about the Mapuche people's demand for land rights *versus* the legality of their property based on illegitimate (land) acquisition processes.

Secondly, because the large-scale model has caused such major negative externalities that only society as a whole has had to assume this cost, given that forestry companies and the Chilean state have not taken any responsibility for it. Therefore they do not assume the cost that translates into social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts on the population inhabiting those territories where forestry plantations are concentrated, in particular the Mapuche population.



This image is taken in Arauco province but it can be extrapolated to various parts of the Mapuche territory: to Lumaco, Collipulli, Traiguén, Imperial, Ercilla, Lanco, Tirúa, etc, where the so-called sustainability practised by forest companies has to be protected with a strong, heavily armed police contingent, funded with money from all the Chilean people. A separate very well-known chapter are the continuous abuses and violations of communities and people's rights carried out by these military police squads in Mapuche territories.

It should be mentioned that the concept of sustainability has two features that are not present in the case of the Chilean forestry model. One is the diversity of biological systems, that obviously a large-scale monoculture model does not fulfil, and the second one is the long term productivity in balance with the species. In this case, both are very far from being achieved.

As long as peoples' rights carry on being subject to economic interests imposed by means of violent processes, the economic activities developed by forestry companies will continue to find strong social and political resistance, especially coming from peoples like the Mapuche who have never given up their political and territorial rights.

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify that the Chilean forestry model based on large-scale exotic monocultures, whose management and harvesting is done intensively under the exclusive logic of economic optimization, is far from being a sustainable model.

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