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Isthmus Forests Threatened

by LADB Staff

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By 2010, Costa Rica, known for its forests and woodlands, will have a wood shortage. The illegal felling of trees will increase. The country will be importing wood at a cost of US\$500 million, and reforestation as an economic and social activity will decline.

This will be the result, said the Energy and Environment Ministry (MINAЕ) in a press release, of "the lack of stimulants for investment in forestry." Fondo Nacional de Financiamiento Forestal (FONAFIFO) data show that reforestation has diminished from 9,000 hectares planted in 1996 to less than 3,000 ha in 2003. MINAE has brought a forestry-development bill to the legislature to prevent this scenario from playing out, but the situation reflects similar conditions in other countries of the isthmus (see NotiCen, 2002-08-08).

In Panama, ecological groups are urging wood producers to certify that they are responsibly exploiting the forests that cover 44% of the land. At a forum on the subject in October, World Wildlife Federation (WWF) delegate Steve Gretzinger told an audience of campesinos and people involved in lumbering, "In the world there are 500 businesses dedicated to the production, purchase, and sale of wood products from responsible providers." His comments were part of a pitch to get them to follow sustainable practices.

WWF works in Panama with the Red de Comercio Forestal (RCF). Gretzinger said the RCF receives requests from these buyers to put them in contact with wood producers who follow sustainable practices. The two organizations are encouraging a certification process to identify these producers to provide an economic incentive against illegal harvesting of trees. The RCF seal of approval has become, he said, a "mark of credibility" in the international lumber market, as well as an assurance of quality, price advantage, and innovation in products. The US company Home Depot, which buys 1% of world lumber production, is an example of certification-friendly buyers. Gretzinger said the company has changed its purchasing practices in favor of certified producers.

But in Panama, there are no certified producers, according to WWF Central America representative Mauro Salazar. There are 653 such producers throughout the isthmus. WWF has been working with the organization Jagwood during the past six months on a pilot certification project in the Panamanian province of Darien, where most of the country's forestlands are concentrated. In this area, on the border with Colombia, deforestation claims between 45,000 ha and 47,000 ha of land each year, or approximately 1.5% of the country's forests. At this rate, the forests will be gone within the lifetimes of the youngest Panamanians.

Certification will not solve the problem

Certification is unlikely to stem illegal cutting in Panama, even if these programs are successful. The Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente (ANAM) continues to confiscate bootleg mahogany, as it did

in November when its agents captured 127 hardwood planks in the Parque Nacional Soberania and the Parque Camino de Cruces. These few boards have a commercial value of US\$12,000, an irresistible incentive to poachers. Investigation following the confiscation revealed widespread cutting of other species in the parks as well. The cutters were neither arrested nor identified, partly because authority to run down culprits rests with the Public Ministry. It's not ANAM's job.

Lider Sucre, executive director of the Asociacion Nacional para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza, said the trees might not even have been there if the parks had not been located within the old canal zone and protected for many years by US troops (see NotiCen, 2001-05-17). Sucre said ANAM needs more money from the government to hire guards for the national parks. Just since Panama has taken over the area, criminal depredation of the parklands has been enough to cause the extinction of some animal species. Even where certification efforts have advanced, they have had only a small impact on regional deforestation.

In Honduras, where the RCF has certified some producers and manufacturers of guitars, boats, and other wooden goods, illegal lumbering is a major environmental threat. As part of an emphasis on protecting the forests, the Corporacion Hondureno de Desarrollo Forestal (Cohdefor) has fired and replaced some of its directors after investigations into their activities. The regional directors of Atlantida, Comayagua, El Paraiso, La Mosquitia, and Yoro have been removed. New Cohdefor regional director Carlos Madrid said his institution is continuing to crack down on irregularities in the industry with inspections of lumberyards, sawmills, and wood processors. "Inspecting these establishments, we can determine how much lumber has been cut legally and how much has not. The excessive exploitation of the resource is easily provable," he concluded on the basis of the investigations.

Madrid's inspections are concentrated in the San Pedro Sula area, where lumber and logs from the areas where Cohdefor officials have been dismissed comes for processing and export. The city has 53 lumberyards and more than 30 sawmills. The inspections are not yet completed, but evidence of malfeasance is already accumulating. It is unclear, however, what penalties violators will face. "The actions that will be taken will be decided in Tegucigalpa," said Rosa Maria Hernandez, the Cohdefor chief in charge of protected areas around San Pedro Sula.

The predatory species people and weevils

Hernandez said that, in addition to mismanagement and unlicensed harvesting, the forests are also threatened by a new species of weevil, different from the one that damaged 4,000 ha in 2002. This one has so far attacked only about 30 ha in El Merendon, and Cohdefor is taking action to prevent a repeat of the 2002 plague that claimed a substantial part of the El Cusuco national park. In Nicaragua, it is not only the lure of big money, but also the need for small money that mows down the forests. Entrepreneurs burn precious trees for the production of charcoal and sell it to fire the nation's stoves. Despite UN studies showing charcoal production to be growing to crisis proportions in the next several years, Nicaragua does not control the practice.

Consumers are turning increasingly to charcoal in Managua as prices of butane spiral out of the reach of many households. The Instituto Nacional Forestal (Inafor) does not regulate or measure

charcoal production. Inafor specialist Henry Saravia said that a license is required for cutting firewood, but they have no institutional control over charcoal production because landowners allow it to be produced, or produce it themselves on their properties, and sell it. Saravia placed his hopes on a new law that would give Inafor authority to regulate this production. He said the law would provide funds for more inspectors. Additional resources would also enable his agency to reforest the charcoal-burning areas and control harvesting, as it now does where firewood is legally cut. They will be able to reforest with species best suited for the purpose.

As these countries struggle to preserve and augment the forests they still have, El Salvador has already lost that battle and instead is aiming at regrowing its wood supply. The country currently imports about US\$35 million of wood and lumber. With the help of a forestry law and funds from the Banco Multisectorial de Inversiones (BMI), the Agriculture and Livestock Ministry (MAG) is seeking to stimulate reforestation of pine and other species to reduce imports and gain the benefits of returned woodlands.

Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Mario Salaverria said that funding would enable the cultivation of trees on 35,000 ha, 20,000 ha of which would be on land now given over to coffee. This is a comparatively large undertaking for the tiny country that scarcely has 6,000 forested ha left to its name, producing less than 10% of the volume of imported forest products. Most pine production will center on the departments of Morison and Chalatenango, where, according to MAG officials, forests are most needed. The money for the program will be paid out in the form of bonuses to owners of 1 ha or more. MAG estimates that 1,111 trees can be planted per hectare.

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