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Guest Author

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## Chile Lacks Environmental Policy

*by Guest*

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[The following article by Hugo Godoy Leon is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the April 23, 2003, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

For more than 10 years, the Chilean government has blocked green legislation that would protect native forests by regulating logging and slowing the deterioration of their fragile ecosystems. About 21% (15.6 million hectares) of Chile's total area is forested. Almost 90% of that is native forest, according to a World Bank-funded study published in 1999. Chile has 12 native tree species, including the alerce, whose typical life span (over 3,000 years) is exceeded only by California's bristlecone pine, and the araucaria or "monkey puzzle tree," the world's oldest surviving tree species.

Chile's native forests include the world's second-largest expanse of temperate rain forest, including the Valdivian rain forest dominated by the evergreen forest type unique to Chile. More than one-quarter of the world's remaining temperate rain forests are in Chile. These forests, however, are seriously threatened by logging, clearing for cattle pastures, and forest fires. About 45% of the original tree cover has already been lost, and 76% of what is left is threatened.

The forests are home to mammals and birds such as the pudu, the world's smallest deer, and a hummingbird that builds its nest entirely from moss and spiderwebs.

A number of animal and bird species and at least 11 tree species are considered threatened or in danger of extinction. The administration of President Ricardo Lagos has shown little interest in the environment.

Legislative proposals have stalled, while approved green regulations have not been enforced (see NotiSur, 2002-08-02). Members of the Senate Agriculture Commission have expressed "concern and discouragement" at the level of disinterest. An official document sent to Lagos by the commission in early April stated that, "despite expectations and national interest in legislation for the native forest, there is still a lack of definition of this important issue."

About 40,000 hectares of Chile's forest are lost each year to deforestation, according to Greenpeace.

Efforts by environmentalists to establish good-practice certification have not been well received by logging companies. Some of the cleared native forest has been replaced by millions of pine and eucalyptus trees, fast-growing non-native species introduced by logging companies. This does not constitute reforestation, however, because no other plants grow under the canopy of these tree varieties. The nongovernmental Terram Foundation says that "all studies warn that, in recent years, the principal impact on the forests has been the introduction of non-native plantations."

Another potential threat to Chile's native forest is the Alumysa project, an ambitious plan by the Canadian metals giant Noransa to build a huge aluminum smelter in the heart of the temperate forest in the Aysen area or Region XI in southern Chile. The US\$2.7 billion project would flood 10,200 ha of forest, rivers, and pristine lakes with six dams that would generate electricity for the plant.

"The government is evaluating the issue politically and thumbs its nose at scientific, economic, social, and environmental studies on which decisions about this type of investment should be based," said Jenia Jofre, leader of Aysen Life Reserve, a coalition of organizations opposed to the project. The coalition includes the Comite Nacional Pro Defensa de la Fauna y Flora (CODEFF), Defenders of the Chilean Forest, and Greenpeace Chile.

A new battleground could also open up as a result of free-trade agreements signed by Chile last year with the European Union (EU) and South Korea, as well as another being negotiated with the US (see NotiSur, 2002-12-20). "We are convinced that the free-trade agreements will speed up the forests' deterioration and possible disappearance," said Adriana Hoffmann, president of Defenders of the Chilean Forest. "These treaties have strengths and weaknesses, including an obvious negative impact on the native forest through deregulation and an increase in commercial tree plantations, which now represent the country's second-largest export sector," she said.

Exports of forest products totaled US\$512 million last year and are expected to reach US\$600 million this year. The rise of the timber-export industry has been accompanied by conflict, including serious clashes in the southern Araucania region between logging companies and indigenous communities and small farmers (see NotiSur, 2002-11-08).

Oswaldo Sunkel, director of the Universidad de Chile's Centro de Analisis de Politicos Publicos, said that studies conducted since 1996 in the worst affected areas indicate that, from an environmental perspective, the country's current economic model and development policies are not sustainable in the long run, and that a policy U-turn is required to avoid serious repercussions over the next two decades. Hoffman said that Chile's main problem is that "there is no forestry policy," adding that "as long as the policy is that there is no policy, we will witness the gradual degradation of the native forest that is our heritage."

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