



DEFORESTATION ENDS WITH THE ATLANTIC FOREST IN PARAGUAY



It is like a photo that is repeated in thousands of equal images, almost like a unique landscape along the routes that cross the entire Eastern Region of Paraguay, especially in the areas that correspond to the territory of the BAAPA, which includes 10 departments of the country: Amambay, Paraguari, Concepción, Canindeyú, Caazapá, Alto Paraná, Caaguazú, San Pedro, Guairá and Itapúa. In this region, deforestation wiped out 1,282,989 hectares of forest cover from 2001 to 2019 according to Global Forest Watch (GFW) satellite records. The same dimension that the Central, Paraguari, and Asunción departments add together.

BAAPA is part of one of the 200 most important ecoregions on the planet, thus identified by the United Nations (UN). It integrates what is known as the Atlantic Forest which originally covered more than 1,300,000 km² (130 million hectares) from the Atlantic coast of Brazil to the northeast of Argentina, and to the east of Paraguay, a country in which all the natural wealth is in grave danger.

The devastation of the forests, which began in the Eastern Region of Paraguay in the 1970s with the entry of mechanized agriculture, forced the authorities to think of ways to protect the forests and the habitat of thousands of species that they harbor. This is how various legal instruments were established, the most important being the creation of the SINASIP, Sistema Nacional



FACTSHEET

CASE: Deforestation in the Atlantic Forest

LOCATION: Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest (BAAPA)

SUBJECT/ENVIRONMENT: 1. Forest issues. 1.1. Deforestation.

JUDICIAL/GOVERNMENTAL STATUS OF THE CASE: It has been 16 years since the zero deforestation law was approved in the eastern region of Paraguay; however, the deforestation rate remains quite high.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE AFFECTED: Indefinite

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: Deforestation wiped out 1,282,989 hectares of forest cover from 2001 to 2019 in the 10 of the 14 departments that make up the BAAPA area, Bosque Atlántico Alto Paraná [Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest], according to satellite records of the Global Forest Watch (GFW). The same dimension that the Central, Paraguari, and Asunción departments add together.

de Áreas Protegidas del Paraguay [National System of Protected Areas of Paraguay], through a law in 1994.

Two years after SINASIP was created, the Law 716 was enacted in 1996 which punishes crimes against the environment. They were not the only regulations created. From 1990 to today, at least ten very specific and concrete laws have been formalized that are directly related to environmental protection which seek to protect forests, rivers, and even soils. Perhaps, the most famous is the one that became known as the “Ley de Deforestación Cero” [“Zero Deforestation Law”], Law 2,524/2004 which came into force in 2005, and that prohibits the felling, or clearing of forests in the entire Eastern Region due to the alarming figures deforestation that existed in those times. Despite all these regulations, the destruction of the Atlantic Forest in Paraguay has not stopped.

A report from the UNA, Universidad Nacional de Asunción [National University of Asunción], indicates that the Eastern Region had a wooded area of 5,650,000 hectares in 1984. By 2018, it was reduced to 2,745,156 hectares according to a report from the INFONA, Instituto Forestal Nacional [National Forest Institute]. That is, 48% of the forest area was lost in 34 years. GFW satellite data indicates that the Atlantic Forest influence region, which spans 10 of the 14 departments of the Eastern Region, loses an average of 49,000 hectares per year despite the Zero Deforestation Law.

Timber extraction, grain crops, and marijuana plantations are listed as the main causes. Of these three activities, the last one has been installed with total impunity in protected areas throughout the region destroying native forests.

However, historically, soybean has been and continues being the main reason for so many clearings in the area of influence of the Atlantic Forest. According to data from the INBIO, Instituto de Biotecnología Agrícola [Institute of Agricultural Biotechnology], in the 2019-2020 agricultural season, soybean occupied 3,637,511 hectares in departments that are part of the BAAPA.

This helped Paraguay to become the fifth largest soybean producer in the world with a production of 9.9 million tons. This is what a report from the United States Department of Agriculture points out, a country that is the second largest producer in the world with 96.8 million tons behind Brazil, which continues to be the largest soybean producer on the planet with 125 million tons in the referred campaign.

According to the CAPECO, Cámara Paraguaya de Exportadores y Comercializadores de Cereales y Oleaginosas [Paraguayan Chamber of Cereal and Oilseed Exporters, and Marketers], the sowing territory of all grains throughout the Paraguayan territory covered a total of 1,050,000 hectares in the 1996-1997 harvest including soybean, corn and rice, among others. At the same time, the forest area in the Eastern Region of Paraguay was 4,208,700 hectares according to data from the Ministerio del Ambiente [Ministry of the Environment]. Twenty years later, the reality is already different; soybean has reached 3.6 million hectares in the Eastern Region alone while the forested area dropped to 2,745,156 hectares according to GFW satellite reports.

Currently, a large part of this forest remnant is kept in reserve areas or national parks which are increasingly suffocated by soybean plantations that, in most cases, exceed the buffer lines that should serve to protect the core of the forests. Currently, in the Eastern Region, at least 1,700,000 hectares are within protected areas, monitored through the SINASIP. To protect all this territory, the Ministry of the Environment has 53 park rangers when the ideal number to carry out an

effective control, according to the technicians of this institution, would be at least 250 park rangers. The lack of a ministerial budget makes it impossible to hire more forestry personnel.

Global Forest Watch (GFW) is part of a project of the World Resources Institute (WRI), and of Google that has information, and collaboration from 40 international institutions. It is a tool that performs daily monitoring of forest losses around the world in real time thanks to a diverse satellite system. The database covers information from 2001 to 2019.

When it comes to Paraguay, the GFW data is brutal. During that period, the country lost 6,033,095 hectares of tree cover, that is, 14% of the country's territory (40,675,200 hectares), a figure that in all of South America is only surpassed by the giant of the continent, Brazil, which ranks as number one in worldwide clearing with 56 million hectares lost from 2001 to 2019, but that represents 6% of its entire territory. That is to say, regarding the surface, Paraguay has lost more hectares of forests than Brazil itself in the last 19 years.



STATE WEAKNESS



Rodrigo Zárate, director of Guyra Paraguay, an organization that has been working for 20 years to conserve the environment in the Atlantic Forest area, specifically in the San Rafael Nature Reserve, holds that the current situation is catastrophic for, despite the existence of a prohibiting law, the destruction of forests has not stopped. “We still have very high rates. The Zero Deforestation law has not been a valid alternative to avoid deforestation because there is no state control capacity”, Zárate says.

The environmentalist talks about what happens to the San Rafael Nature Reserve, a 73,000-hectares forested remnant embedded between the Itapúa, and Caazapá departments which, according to the papers, should be protected by the State since 1992, but suffers constant abuse in practice. He says that in the early years, timber traffickers and poachers were the problem, and they became big headaches for park rangers and for the people who work to protect the Reserve.

Zárate says this problem started mutating since the area began to be a breeding ground for marijuana producers who found in the protected areas of the Eastern Region a safe place to spread their crops over the years.

A report from the SENAD, Secretaría Nacional Antidrogas [National Anti-Drug Secretariat], indicates that from 2018 to mid-2020, 81,982 kilograms of marijuana have been seized that were processed in plots within four protected areas that are part of SINASIP in the Eastern Region which correspond to those of San Rafael, Mbaracayú (Canindeyú), Morombí Reserve (Caaguazú, and Canindeyú), and Caazapá National Park (Caazapá).

In the so-called “fight against drugs,” the presence of these protected areas became effective territory for drug traffickers to operate with impunity. Although there are significant amounts of parcels destroyed each year by anti-drug agents, the reality is that no one responsible has neither been detained, nor prosecuted for environmental destruction. For those who work in the conservation of these protected areas, the entry of the drug world has been added to a series of already existing illicit activities such as the trafficking of roundwoods, the invasion of land, and the insatiable expansion of soybean plantations which are reducing the forests.

The Public Ministry has 27 specialized agents in the Environmental Unit. In some sensitive areas, such as the Canindeyú, Guairá, San Pedro, or Itapúa departments, the prosecutor’s office has only one agent for each location, and these agents also have to attend other criminal cases on many occasions. In turn, the DE-BOA, Departamento de Estudios Ambientales de la Policía Nacional [Department of Environmental Affairs of the National Police] -which is located in Capiatá, a distant metropolitan city about 350 kilometers from the Atlantic Forest area- has just 60 officers, and three patrol boats to receive complaints in the whole country.

“Nobody pays any attention to us,” Rodrigo Zárate almost desperately laments. He remembers that in a recent request for fiscal intervention made in writing by Guyra due to an invasion of land



that they had in full reserve, the Prosecutor's Office requested that the organization had the payment of the municipal tax at hand to make the raid possible. "It's a real madness," Zárate enquires.

José Luis Cartes, director of Guyra Paraguay, says that the San Rafael Nature Reserve is a reflection of everything that happens in all the other protected areas of the region. "The problems of San Rafael were getting worse and worse. Every season of political elections, things get worse with more illegal acts. He says that the peasants always claim that they enter a tax surpluses area. However, Law 352/94 on protected wild areas establishes that if there is a surplus of fiscal land, it must automatically become part of the protected area," Cartes explains.

Currently, the San Rafael Nature Reserve bears two large incursions by groups of people. The concern of the organizations that work in the conservation of this place is based on the fact that this type of situation almost certainly ends with the clearing of more forests, at the judgement of Cartes.



PROVOKING FIRES TO DEFOREST

To all the aforementioned, there are also forest fires which are part of the events that cause deforestation. Park rangers point out that after years of witnessing fires with later appearance of marijuana crops in the same damaged areas, they no longer know with certainty if the fires are a product of the drought or if they are caused

on purpose. The truth is that these environmental tragedies, as they are considered, greatly harm the fauna and flora, and the indigenous communities that depend on them as well.

At the operational headquarters of the PRO COSARA, Organización Pro Cordillerana San Rafael [Pro Cordillerana San Rafael Organization], which works in the heart of the San Rafael Nature Reserve, at least 25 families from the Santa Ana peasant community, adjacent to the buffer zone of the protected area, were evacuated due to fires that raged across the area in November 2020, and that destroyed their homes.

The PRO COSARA workers -who struggled for days against the fires, and to evacuate people- continue in the labor of getting food for these people, especially for the children, who are in a good quantity. In the Arroyo Moroti indigenous community of the Mbya Guaraní people, in the territory known to the indigenous people as "Tekoha Guasu" within the San Rafael Nature Reserve, the fire consumed the houses, and the yerba mate plantations that the inhabitants had.

Eusebio Chaparro, leader of this community where around 50 families live, talks about the day by day in the community. Although these lands are titled in favor of the indigenous people in an area of 1,000 hectares, the reality is that they have not received





any state aid for a long time. Some children from the community sit on the ground, and listen while Chaparro speaks. Chaparro says the community school has practically stopped operating since the pandemic.

For Alicia Eisenkölbl, executive director of PRO COSARA, the specific event that generates this entire chain of unfavorable situations is the lack of legal definition of the Reserve which does not appear as a National Park in the national legal order until now.

“San Rafael is an area that is not consolidated as a National Park, and that is a big problem. The loss of biodiversity that we have with the fires and with the clearings afterwards is very important,” Alicia says.

For the environmentalist, what San Rafael contains is not only reduced to an environmental problem, but it also carries a very important social burden since the communities, especially indigenous people who live in the Reserve, are greatly affected, and involved in the problems that the deforestation suffered by what the protected area entails, either due to clearing (for mechanized, or marijuana plantations), or to fires.

Eisenkölbl also regrets the irreparable loss in terms of biodiversity that the Atlantic Forest has suffered, but she has faith that protected areas can be minimally protected.

Reserves and Parks, however, are the last hope for future generations to enjoy natural forests in the region.