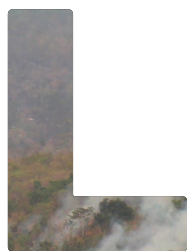




THE FIRES AND DESTRUCTION OF THE UPPER PARANÁ ATLANTIC FOREST

The year 2020 will not only be remembered for being that of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it will have the ungrateful memory of having been one of the years with the highest number of fires that was registered in Paraguay at an environmental level. The entire Paraguayan territory registered 12,000 fire outbreaks in October of that year only. In the Eastern Region which converges with the BAAPA, Bosque Atlántico Alto Paraná [Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest], the fire destroyed thousands of hectares of protected areas, affecting a number of species in flora and fauna that researchers still have no way to quantify, but specialists speak of irreparable damage.



The scientist Fátima Mereles, botanist, professor, and explorer at the UNA, Universidad Nacional de Asunción [National University of Asunción], assures that the damage in terms of lost species in the Atlantic Forest due to the deforestation suffered in recent years is incalculable, and it has been aggravated by the fires of the last year. From Guyrá Paraguay, an organization that has worked for decades in the conservation and research of wildlife and protected areas in the country, it was pointed out that there is a team that continues working on data collection to have the largest possible record of what has been lost by these fires, but definitely, the environmental damage in terms of species loss is enormous.

Ashes fall everywhere from the gray sky. The smoke that comes out of the forests of the San Rafael Nature Reserve in the Itapúa department throughout the entire mountain range is thick, and does not even allow us to see what is more than 50 meters away. The wind seems an uncontrolled whirlpool at times, and the threads of fire rise up to the top of the dry trees. It is impossible to fight against the voracity of the flames that are consuming everything. In a few hours, native trees that are 100 to 200 years old end up in ashes.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE ATLANTIC FOREST

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FACTSHEET

CASE: Forest fires

LOCATION: Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest and Paraguayan Chaco

SUBJECT/ENVIRONMENT:

1. Forest issues. 1.2. Forest fires

JUDICIAL/GOVERNMENTAL STATUS

OF THE CASE: The Environmental Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Environment opened investigations, but the process is still ongoing.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE

AFFECTED: undefined.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: Forest

fires in recent years affected a large part of the country's ecoregions including the Pantanal, El Cerrado, the Alto Paraná Atlantic Forest (BAAPA), and the wooded areas of the Paraguayan Chaco. The flames caused serious damage to environmental biodiversity in both the Atlantic Forest, and the Chaco, and harmed numerous peasant and indigenous communities, mainly the BAAPA.

According to a report from the MADES, Ministerio del Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible [Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development], this protected area has lost 29,650 hectares due to forest fires, that is, 40% of its entire territory which is about 73 thousand hectares. "It just makes you want to cry," Celia Garayo says, coordinator of the PRO COSARA, Pro Cordillera San Rafael organization, who has worked for years in the conservation of the reserve. Garayo says that they have fought as best as they could against the fires for weeks, but that it was impossible if they do not have more advanced equipment, especially because of the force with which the fires spread this time.

In addition to the pandemic, the country endured a harsh drought this year, reaching around nine or ten months without rains in various areas that made fires easier to multiply through heat sources that were detected by satellites. Between August, and October, there were around 2,500 to 3,000 weekly outbreaks throughout the Paraguayan territory according to satellite data from the Ministry of the Environment. These outbreaks quickly turned into large fires, and the situation was dramatic in various parts of the Paraguayan territory. The smoke was constant, covering urban, and rural areas for days. Even dwellers from Asunción, and those who live in the metropolitan area suffered the consequences of a smoky environment as never before.

But those who went through the worst situations were the families who live in the regions where these fires were generated. In this sense, the fire that struck a large part of the BAAPA that holds the communities that live within the forest remnants as victims in addition to the fauna and flora. In Alto Verá where an important part of the San Rafael Nature Reserve is located in the BAAPA, the fire devoured peasant and indigenous communities. Peasant families living in Santa Ana, adjacent to the reserve, had to be temporarily evacuated at Pro Cosara's operational headquarters. At least 25 families had a roof to shelter after losing their homes in the multipurpose room. Diosme Garay, one of the residents of the Santa Ana community, tells that they have endured the intense heat and the smoke for several days. Garay says there are days of intense sun with little wind while the smoke stays in the environment for hours.

24 Inside the San Rafael Nature Reserve there is an indigenous community from the Mbya Guaraní people called Arroyo Morotĩ to which they refer to as the "tekoha guasu". The fire consumed their yerba mate plantations that were part of an indigenous organic yerba mate production program. The only thing remaining today is the smell of cocido [tea made from yerba mate] that is perceived throughout the environment.

Eusebio Chaparro is the leader of this community that is submerged in poverty, and that, despite being located on the Guaraní aquifer -one of the most important freshwater reserves in the world-, does not even have drinking water for its 50 families. "We have to go get water from a nearby stream," Don Chaparro says.

The leader Chaparro lost 12 hectares that already had time working, that were ready enough to progress with the project.

Now it is a fresh start, he says. Chaparro, barefoot and hard-eyed, talks about the needs of his community. He mentions the lack of support from the authorities which did not appear in this pandemic and even less after the fires. It is like a release from so much neglect that they suffer in a land that was the home of their ancestors just decades ago, when it was far from suffering the current threats.

Ramón Benítez from the Pykasu'i community, located a few kilometers from Arroyo Morotĩ, lost his entire home in the fires. Don Benítez even shows how his utensils were scorched by the intensity of the fire. Not even a usable pot was left. As in Arroyo Morotĩ, the help from state institutions has been scarce in his community, but Benítez has a little hope that at least the rain will fall to eliminate the sources of fire that still surround his community and the entire reserve.

According to the Global Forest Watch (GFW) satellite system, the Caazapá department registered 1,500 forest fire alerts between October and November 2020. It points out that there were about 2,997 fire alerts in the same period in Itapúa. Of this amount, 1,580 alerts were registered in the town of Alto Verá.

Fighting the fire became almost impossible for forest firefighters working in this region of the country. With little staff, and a lo-





gistics that was not enough to cope with all the lights, this handful of people had a very heavy job to stop the fires. In the case of the San Rafael Nature Reserve, Pro Cosara technicians also worked on the evacuation of the affected families, and even had to find resources to feed them. Some producers in the area brought food such as milk, cookies, and others so that they could be distributed to the evacuated people. The rains that fell between the last days of November and the beginning of December brought calm, and helped reduce the intensity of the floodlights. By the second week of December, potential fire outbreaks were down to 300 or so throughout the Eastern Region according to GFW.

Alicia Eisenkölbl, executive director of PRO COSARA, says that the specific fact that generates this entire chain of unfavor-

able situations is the lack of legal definition of the Reserve. "San Rafael is an area that is not consolidated as a National Park and that is a big problem. For example, it is possible to take advantage of changing the use of land when we have these fires, and that is a problem that arises with no control by the enforcement authorities. The loss of biodiversity that we have with the fires and with the afterwards clearings is very important," Alicia comments.

"Charcoal is being made from the richest and most biodiverse forest in the country," José Luis Cartes, director of the Guyrá Paraguay Organization, adds. "The forest can only be burned when it is already very degraded with extreme weather conditions. Unfortunately, we had that condition of historical drought, and many people took the opportunity to attack the forest ... there was a war (and it continues) declared against the forest in San Rafael with the aim of exterminating those forests," Cartes says.





THE GRAN CHACO

In the Gran Chaco, at the other end of Paraguay in the western region, fires have also caused havoc in recent times in an area where livestock has been imposed, and where, little by little, mechanized agriculture is gaining ground. Just across the Paraguayan border, in the territory of Bolivian Chiquitania, the authorities estimate the destruction of about four to five million hectares devastated by the flames, a true environmental catastrophe.

On the Paraguayan side, the records speak of 300 thousand hectares destroyed by fires in 2019. In the month of May of 2020, the MADES intervened five cattle establishments in the town of Tacuara, Benjamín Aceval, lower Chaco, where fires destroyed 10,000 hectares. The MADES's intervention was due to the suspicion that the fires were made to convert forests into pastures for livestock. In this sense, a GFW report indicates that 93% of the loss of forest mass in Paraguay in 2019 was due to activities related to the production of raw materials such as beef, soybeans, and wood.

The Plataforma Nacional de Commodities Sustentables [Sustainable Commodities National Platform] indicates on its website that soybean production currently covers 3,380,000 hectares in our country. It also mentions that soybean is the agricultural product that generates the most income for the local economy, with a little more than USD 3,000 million a year covering 62% of exports, and contributing about 17% of GDP according to this platform.

In terms of beef production, Paraguay was in the top 10 largest meat exporters in the world until 2019. At the end of that year, our country sold 320,000 tons (carcass weight) of beef, according to data from the Paraguayan Meat Chamber. In addition, the Chaco recorded exponential livestock growth: From the 3.5 million heads of livestock herd in 2009, the Chaco bovine population closed with 6,473,531 heads ten years later according to data from the ARP, Asociación Rural del Paraguay [Rural Association of Paraguay].





For the engineer Luis Codas, a former Paraguayan congressman linked to the Chaco cattle world, it is nonsense to think that all the fires registered in the country are intentionally caused to gain pasture. "Which is the rancher who is going to set fire on purpose when risking the lives of his animals, who is going to burn his own land?"

However, he speaks of the unconsciousness or ignorance of the people as a key factor in finding those responsible for the fires since it is said that most of them are generated by human intervention. "People throw away their cigarette butts without thinking about the damage that it can cause. Imagine that with dry pasture, and a little wind it becomes uncontrollable," he says. However, he assures that he does not doubt that there are people who also do it with other intentions. Considering this situation, Codas speaks of the importance of a present State.

In that sense, he mentions that the State institutions that must watch over, and control these situations are unfortunately without many resources. "We have to seek to be more predictable. What is the use of coming to the place when everything is already burned? We need more logistics to face difficult situations". Coda says.

In the Paraguayan Pantanal, an area of extremely rich biodiversity that is part of the greater Pantanal (holding 16 million hectares including territories of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay), the fires continued this year. A report by the FAN, Fundación Amigos por la Naturaleza [Friends for Nature Foundation], from Bolivia

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indicates that from January 1 to August 4 of 2020 the fires affected a total of 768 thousand hectares in the Great Pantanal. Of this amount, 86 thousand hectares (11%) corresponds to Paraguayan territory, 147 thousand (19%) hectares to Bolivian, and 534 thousand (70%) hectares to Brazilian territory.

"Fortunately, this year the fires did not affect our communities, but the problem is that forests are burned, and wild animals are lost which are our food," César Barboza explains. He is an indigenous councilman of Bahía Negra in the Alto Paraguay Department, and a resident of the Yshir people's Puerto Diana community who have lived for about 500 years in the Paraguayan Pantanal area, considered the ancestral inhabitants of these lands.

The fires did not directly affect the indigenous communities in the Bahía Negra area, but they affected the forests that surround them, forests that traditionally represent part of community's life, rooted in their customs and beliefs.

