

Paradise Lost

The Forests of Michoacán

Josefina María Cendejas*



Elsie Montiel

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the forest has been the emblem of Michoacán. In the last two decades, however, the state's greenery has begun to thin out and the devastation shows no signs of stopping. This article is the result of the first stages of research into the origins of this chaos in the forest, research that reflects on the matter from a different reference point: the perceptions of the forest communities that are experiencing the problem and that can be the guide to dealing with it.

* Professor and researcher at the San Nicolás Hidalgo Michoacán University's Institute for Research on Natural Resources.

What gives this project meaning is concern about the growing loss of cultural diversity seemingly implicit in globalization. Its starting point is the conviction that cultural diversity has made it possible for first peoples to survive for millennia in very changing and adverse conditions. The loss of this diversity, therefore, endangers both human communities and the other species that coexist in the same territory with them.

PARADISE LOST?

For years, to speak of Michoacán was to speak of a kind of forest paradise, surpassed in forest acreage only by Durango and Chihuahua. Michoacán is also

the nation's fifth most bio-diverse state, following Veracruz, Oaxaca, Tabasco and Chiapas. Its millennia-long geological history produced different kinds of soil that sustains a broad variety of plant and animal communities.¹ Michoacán boasts 14 types of vegetation with more than 5,000 species of plants; 143 species of mammals; 492 species of birds; 175 species of reptiles; and 100 species of fish. This enormous variety corresponds to the variations in its topography which creates different ecological systems with climates from temperate to warm, from sub-humid to semi-dry.

For an idea of the importance of the forests in the state, suffice it to say that they cover 70.27 percent of the state's six

million hectares.² However, 1,355,878 hectares of that area have been reported as disturbed: they have been turned into grazing or cultivated land and fruit orchards. This means that, for different reasons, despite its great biodiversity and potential, the state is suffering from a huge loss of plant cover.

According to the State Environment and Natural Resources Program, the rate of deforestation is from 40,000 to 100,000 hectares a year (15,000 hectares of forest and 25,000 hectares of jungles). In the last 15 years, 650,000

hectares of forests have been lost and 500,000 hectares have been eroded. In addition, in the forests that survive, the surface area and quality of tree cover has been disturbed. As a result, Michoacán is the fifth state nationwide in disturbed forest area.³

The enormous regional and national demand for lumber, together with the well-documented voracity of the logging industry, which has the technology and capacity to devour entire forests in record time, are the two jaws of the vise that are strangling the forests and its communities.⁴ The eco-

nomie reasons behind this are the same ones that are always brought up when talking about excessive logging: the state's forestry production creates between 25,000 and 30,000 direct and indirect jobs a year with an economic spill-over of about 600 million pesos.⁵

But the boom in the sector is not so spontaneous: successive deregulation and the lack of efficient mechanisms for surveillance and control have made it increasingly attractive for the logging companies. It is not by chance that the logging industry has tripled its activities from 1992 until today.⁶ It is

TABLE I

GOVERNMENT DIAGNOSTIC ANALYSIS ¹²	COMMUNITY DIAGNOSTIC ANALYSIS (Workshop Findings) ¹³
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of ecologically inappropriate techniques and technologies • Lack of cultural level and forestry training • Illegal or clandestine practices • Over-exploitation of forest resources • Pests and blight • Fires • Over-grazing • Change in the use of forest land to animal husbandry and agriculture • Soil erosion • Inconsistency in legislation and forest norms • Unorganized producers • Disorderly growth of the forestry industry • Speedy population growth • Unemployment and de-capitalization of collective farms (<i>ejidos</i>) and communities • Insufficient income of inhabitants leading to over-exploitation of forest, soil and lake resources • Commercial demand for resources, leading to local inhabitants' shirking ecological responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instead of being beneficial, the use of technologies and the construction of a highway have caused destruction. • There used to be more knowledge about the forest, its plants and animals, which has been lost. • Illegal loggers are not from the community; these are people from outside who come in trucks and are armed. • The community has never over-exploited forest resources since it does not have the means to do so. • Previously, pests were monitored and controlled; the forest was cared for. Now this is no longer possible because it is dangerous to go into the mountains. • Community brigades used to be formed to fight forest fires. This is no longer the case. • Cattle are a problem because they eat seedlings. • People do not cut down trees to plant more crops. On the contrary, people no longer cultivate the land. Much of the land is fallow. • The new powers given the municipal government in forest matters has disconcerted the community regarding budget management. • The sense of cooperation has been lost and people no longer organize as they did before. They feel they can do nothing. • More and more people come from outside to take away what is ours. • There are very few of us left; young people move north and no one is left to work the land or reforest. • Working in the countryside no longer makes you a living; it just brings poverty. • We are only responsible up to a point, since who is going to come help us deal with armed violence?

TABLE 2

INTERNATIONAL NOTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT ¹⁴	COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS (WORKSHOP FINDINGS BASED ON ANALYSIS OF THE INDIGENOUS PROFILE)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a just balance between the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations. • Program 21 recommends ways of strengthening the role of the main groups involved in sustainable development (women, unions, farmers, children and young people, indigenous peoples, the scientific community, local officials, merchants, industry and nongovernmental organizations). • The elimination of poverty and the reduction of differences in living standards worldwide are indispensable for sustainable development; women's full participation is necessary for achieving sustainable development. • The world's forests are critically important from the economic, social, cultural and environmental point of view because of the goods and services they contribute. • The mandate of the Intergovernmental Group on Forests includes issues such as the need to formulate national forestry programs, the productive function of forests, trade in forest products and the environment, the conservation of biological diversity, the importance of forests in moderating world climate change and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and forest inhabitants. It also includes matters of technical and financial cooperation among countries. • We should emphasize countries' sovereign right to use their own natural resources according to their development needs; the importance of community participation in forest management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The forest is dying because the community is also dying. People are leaving and we are falling apart. • It is almost exclusively women who go up into the hills to plant. Old people do not have the strength; young people prefer to leave. If we do not get help, we women will not be able to go on alone. • What we produce here is no longer worth anything. We no longer make wooden crafts (masks) because they don't let us cut off the pieces of wood and they don't pay us for our work. To survive, we go to the market where we trade in kind like people did years ago, because we no longer earn money to buy things. • We have planted trees for seven years because we know that the forest is very important, not only for us but for everyone. But, what good is it if others cut them down? • The programs are good: we have learned to do things thanks to them. But some of them haven't worked because they brought in plants that weren't from here. The army comes in to reforest, but they don't plant; they pull down the trees. The climate has changed a lot. Before it was cooler and there was less wind. Before there was more water. Now things are different because there are fewer trees. There were also coyotes, armadillos and deer and now there aren't. We have to organize better to demand that officials ask our opinion about the programs and that the government support us so that we be the ones to care for and use our forest. That is not how things are now: we have no rights over it; they've taken it away from us; they've banned us from it. • In the past, we lived in the forest. We went into it all the time. We picked edible mushrooms and medicinal plants. We had harvest festivals there and even weddings. The forest was part of our community's life, but it no longer is. Since we abandoned it, the forest is suffering and so are we.

also commonplace to say that forest depredation is caused by local inhabitants who, given their poverty and the lack of other sources of income, "are forced" to over-exploit the forest and its natural resources. However, studies on this issue show that "the most important factor in speeding up the stripping of the forests is to be found among the big logging interests, which correlates with the imperatives of developmentalist policies. The need to capitalize the sector in the shortest pos-

sible time has led to the over-exploitation of the forest, as though it were an unending source of wealth, and to the detriment of its true owners, the indigenous peoples."⁷

Recovering the point of view of those most affected instead of trying to impose external diagnostic analyses that consider them directly responsible for the damage to their forests was one of the objectives of the first of the four community workshops included in this research project.⁸

THE COMMUNITY WORKSHOP IN NOCUTZEPO

Nocutzepo is located about 20 kilometers from the city of Pátzcuaro. Like other communities in the basin, Nocutzepo has a sizeable, communally-owned forest area. The pilot workshop in this community aimed to evaluate just how much national and local governments' indiscriminate adoption of the international discourse about sustainable development had contributed to reduc-

ing the diversity of native focuses on the environment and see if that loss in cultural diversity is linked to the loss of these resources.⁹ The question is whether we can say, starting from the local viewpoint —specifically about the forest and deforestation— that it is precisely cultural diversity that allows communities to develop alternative paths to ecological and human sustainability, regardless of —or even in frank opposition to— official discourses and programs.

The group was made up of 20 people, mainly women because most men of productive age have emigrated to the United States. In order to get information about changes in community views over time, the group was divided in two: young and older adults in one group and senior citizens in another. Workshop activities took two full days and were based on questions about the meaning of the forest and its resources for the community.

Participants were given a series of definitions of sustainable development found in different international documents. In addition, after a short thematic presentation on the profile of indigenous cultures in Mexico, the groups analyzed distinctive aspects of these cultures to determine which ones continue to exist and which have been lost.¹⁰ They also discussed whether these traits were important for a more sustainable management of the forest.¹¹

INITIAL RESULTS

Given the amount and wealth of data obtained and the time needed to do an exhaustive analysis of it, I will summarize some of the most important findings. To facilitate their comparison

with the external paradigms that influence today's forest management in the region, in table 1, I present the group's opinions on one side and the previous state administration's opinion of the causes of the forest-environmental deterioration on the other. This diagnosis was neither presented nor discussed with the group in order to not influence its own diagnosis. In table 2, I also compare another series of the group's comments with the principles of sustainable forest management upheld by several international bodies, in order to evaluate whether they are included in or coincide with the community's perceptions of the situation of the forest.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the community's ideas are very different from the official state diagnostic analysis of the problem of the forests, but very similar—in their own words and with their own reference points—to that of the international documents. From the community voices, we can infer first of all a painful fact: the weakened communities still in their original habitat, more than “avoiding their ecological responsibility,” feel helpless. They say they have been left on their own to deal with the devastation and violence that, at least in this part of the country, are directly linked to the unrestricted movement of “the free forces of the market economy.” In that context, in addition, they are the least benefitted economically speaking. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, *Programa Estatal de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Natu-*

rales, Michoacán en tránsito al desarrollo sustentable (Morelia, Michoacán: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo del Estado de Michoacán, 1999), p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ María Rosa Nuño Gutiérrez, “La relación naturaleza-cultura en una comunidad purépecha a través de sus expresiones orales,” Luisa Paré and Martha Judith Sánchez, comps., *El ropaje de la Tierra. Naturaleza y cultura en cinco zonas rurales* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdéz, 1996), pp. 50-51.

⁴ According to the State Environment and Natural Resources Program, the industry could handle about four million cubic meters of lumber a year, but, in accordance with authorized forest management programs, only an average of 1.5 million are produced. This means there is strong pressure on the forests, since the deficit is covered by illegal logging.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ María Rosa Nuño Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁸ The State Environment and Natural Resources Program states that the commercial demand for resources has led to the inhabitants themselves abandoning ecological responsibility. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁹ The workshop, titled “Intercultural and Sustainable Development vis-à-vis the Forest and Deforestation,” was held February 26 and 27, 2004.

¹⁰ This was done by applying a matrix based on Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's characterization in *México profundo, una civilización negada* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1987).

¹¹ Participants analyzed the successful experience of the San Juan Nuevo indigenous community, which has become a model for sustainable forest management the world over.

¹² Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51 and 90-91.

¹³ This is a very brief summary of workshop participants' contributions. The complete report can be examined on audio tapes and flip charts.

¹⁴ Taken directly from the U.N. *Resumen de la Agenda XXI* and the document “Principios relativos a los bosques,” www.onu.org.