

Colombia: war and forests

Have environmental factors caused the war in Colombia or have they favored or hindered that war? What consequences does the ongoing conflict bring on to the environment? How have illegal crops, a business closely linked to armed insurgency, affected our environment? Can conservation and sustainable use of the environment become assets to attain social stability and peace? These are but some of the questions raised in "War, Society and the Environment" (*Guerra, Sociedad y Medio Ambiente*)[1], published by the National Environmental Forum (*Foro Nacional Ambiental*). This book looks at critical issues that are tackled by a group of ten experts in social and environmental fields: German Andrade, Alfonso Avellaneda, Carlos Castaño Uribe, Hernán Dario Correa, Dario Fajardo, Guillaume Fontaine, Cesar Ortiz, Alfredo Rangel, Manuel Rodriguez and Ricardo Vargas.

The different book chapters show how environmental issues are deep-rooted in the Colombian armed conflict and how land has not been the only resource under dispute. The armed conflict involves environmental resources in general: water, timber and non timber-yielding products. Most studies have concentrated on forest ecosystems, where insurgent guerrillas settled since they were created more than forty years ago. In the opening chapter of the book, Alfredo Rangel analyzes how guerrilla groups have used these ecosystems as part of their military strategy. Today, guerrillas use forests in various Colombian regions to assemble their fronts; it is a safe heaven from which to plan and unleash rapid attacks against towns and military and police garrisons or in which to plant illegal crops. Moreover, the hard to access Amazon jungle region served as the nest in which *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* FARC, the largest guerrilla group in the country was incubated and nourished, and from which it began expanding towards the rest of the country during the 80s.

The book stresses how many studies undertaken by numerous experts on the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia concentrate on social and political issues, while failing to acknowledge human ecology factors that explain how the conflict is rooted and fueled. There is overwhelming evidence on this matter: how and where major human displacements occur. According to Dario Fajardo's survey, displacement is closely linked to how land is hoarded and how control of territories strategically important for their richness in renewable and non-renewable resources is being sought; to forecasting eventual benefits resulting from installing mayor development projects; or to the military and political importance of certain territories *vis a vis* the armed conflict. Information currently available indicates that 78.4% of displaced people come from areas of the country in which the Gini coefficient for land ownership is above 0.73%. Nonetheless, the book stresses that the environmental factors at the core of the conflict, which has been historically active in fueling violence, is not in itself the cause. Environmental factors may fuel violence, but fueling always springs from interaction between environmental and other economic, political and social factors.

The war brings several consequences to the environment, including those related to illegal crops. German Andrade argues that it is highly likely that certain fauna populations are over exploited today as a source of protein for the large sized human settlements in jungle areas, which include illegal armed groups and State armed forces. Loss of fauna also leads to degradation of many forest ecosystems in the country, due mainly to a reduction or the disappearance of essential seed scatters that are vital for certain flora to survive. The effects of this phenomenon are as serious as deforestation caused by illegal crops which, notwithstanding the variation in estimates, some observers believe affects more than 1,000,000 hectares.

German Andrade, Ricardo Vargas and Cesar Ortiz point out that the most serious environmental effect of illegal crops results mainly from eradication policies and how these policies drive illegal from one place to the next. Vargas' conclusions include the fact that furthering eradication policies undertaken under the last two governments, has changed a situation in which illegal crops were grown in a few of the country's departments to spreading these crops into departments where they were not previously grown or in which they played but a minor role. Illegal crops are undergoing a metastasis that is fragmenting or destroying some of the last Andean remaining natural forests. Eradication policies also deepen social exclusion and environmental marginalization of a large number of small farmers.

More particularly relevant issues are discussed in other chapters. Carlos Castaño indicates how the conflict has roused new road construction, which in turned has fired disorderly colonization and destroyed precious forests. The Government has also undertaken the task of building new roads to increase State presence and to improve ways in which the armed forces can access jungle areas used as strategic safe heavens by illegal armed groups. Guerrillas have also built new roads that cut across natural reserves, as a way of ensuring pathways used to bring weapons into the country and to transport drugs towards the Pacific coast in order to ship them towards the United States and Europe. Chapters by Alfonso Avellaneda and Guillaume Fontaine discuss the relationship between oil, the environment and armed conflict in Colombia.

Lastly, two of the chapters explain how environmental policies undertaken during 1994-2002 have been enforced in a relatively successful manner amidst the conflict: Manuel Rodríguez focuses on "Plan Verde", a community reforestation plan covering 150,000 hectares in areas under severe armed conflict; and Hernán Darío Correa focuses on the policy "parks and people together" (*parques con la gente*) which has included and involved several communities in managing and conserving protected areas. Both of these cases studies evidence how the environment has enormous potential towards building peace. It is a light at the end of a sober and complex tunnel built by the relationship between the armed conflict, society and the environment.

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[1] Cárdenas, Martha and Rodríguez, Manuel (Eds.) *Guerra, medio ambiente y sociedad*. Bogota, Foro Nacional Ambiental, 2004, 570 pgs.