

INTERVIEW WITH ALEJANDRO MORA-MOTTA, ZEF JUNIOR RESEARCHER HOW “GREEN” IS TREE PLANTATION EXTRACTIVISM? FIELD RESEARCH INSIGHTS FROM CHILE

Alejandro did his bachelor's in Economics and his MSc in Development and Environment. His research focus was on the environmental issues arising from the growth-oriented development model in Colombia. In 2015 he received a DAAD scholarship to study the ZEF doctoral program. The scholarship was awarded by the RLC (Right Livelihood College) Campus Bonn in collaboration with the RLC campus Austral-Valdivia in Chile, and its director Professor Dr. Manfred Max-Neef. Alejandro joined ZEF and the RLC program in October 2015 and performed his field research between June 2016 and May 2017.

What is your research about?

My research is about how tree plantation “extractivism” affects peasant and indigenous communities in central-southern Chile. In my approach I talk about extractivism to refer to the phenomenon in which economic activities are based on the extraction of large volumes of unprocessed or little processed natural resources (raw materials), with an export-oriented focus, and with high socio environmental impacts. These activities take mostly place in rural areas and cause transformations.

Which tree species are we talking about in Chile?

Pine and eucalyptus plantations in southern Chile show this pattern, and can be classified as a form of extractivism. The plantations are located mainly in the regions of Biobío, Araucanía, Los Ríos and Los Lagos, which

used to be part of the Mapuche territory. The plantation model started being promoted in the first quarter of the 20th century but it was until the establishment of the neoliberal regime in the early 1970s, under a military dictatorship, that it became one of the leading sectors within the country's development model. After the return to democracy, in 1990, the plantation model became more and more popular. By the end of 2015 around 2.5 million hectares of land were planted in all Chile, almost 18 million tons of wood were extracted, and nearly 11 million tons were exported.

How did you become interested in the topic of tree plantations?

Conducting research on tree plantations is an important issue in two ways: i) in challenging the surprisingly dominant idea that plantations growth is still good for society, and ii) in looking for alternatives to this extractivist model that transcend the technical solutions and recognize political rights to territory for the marginalized peasants and Mapuche people.

How do your insights on the negative aspects of tree plantations correspond with the official version of being a “green” activity?

As I mentioned, plantations are a form of extractivism. However, despite being an activity that causes such territorial transformations, there is a strong public discourse





which labels them as a ‘green’ activity. This means, first, that tree plantations have always been presented as a rational environmental option, supposedly since they protect the soils, are carbon sinks, and prevent deforestation of the remaining native forests. Second, the use of the word ‘forest’ is still disputed in the sense that the government and companies use it interchangeably for plantations and native forests. Third, a complete compound of regulations and policies has been settled following the idea of a ‘green growth’. This new ‘green growth’ policy approach fits the global discourses of the OECD and the SDGs, which are supposed to deliver sustainable development, but when materializing at the local level, they constitute a set of market-based environmental regulations (like the eco-labels) which are encompassed with the territorial regulatory regime (predominantly private property) that gives priority to extractivism. This hides a deep environmental crisis, in which mapuche and peasant communities have progressively lost their territorialities.

Why conducting research in the Region of Los Ríos?

There is a growing amount of researches analysing and interpreting the territorial transformation caused by the plantation model in southern Chile. The plantation model has been implemented mainly in two regions, Biobio and Araucaria, on which, consequentially, most of the research is focused. But more to the south, in Los Ríos and Los Lagos, research on the consequences of the plantations and on the alternatives to them is less prominent. In particular, Los Ríos, which is a relatively new administrative region, separating from Los Lagos in 1997, presents strong

environmental concerns in the public sphere. Despite this, it has one of the highest rates of planted land expansion in the last 30 years.

You have spent around a year conducting field research in Los Ríos. What special experience would you like to share with us?

Well, a mapuche woman told me the story of her mother in law who had to leave her ‘mapu’, her territory, due to the plantations. The village in where she lived happened to become completely surrounded by tree plantations. This process of transformation not only affected the landscape but the deep relation the lady had with all the aspects of the environment. Mapuche people have a very deep conception of ‘the good life’, *Küme mongen*, which accounts for an organic relation between their well-being, the ecosystems and their spirituality. The mother in law left in deep sorrow saying that plantations brought the ‘bad living’ to their territory.

The interview was conducted by Alma van der Veen.

About the interviewpartner

Alejandro Mora-Motta is a ZEF junior researcher. His research is funded by the Right Livelihood College via DAAD.
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