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Environmentalists Concerned that Logging is Denuding Forests in the Dominican Republic

by Crosby Girón

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In July, environmentalists Manuel Francisco Pérez, Juan Novas, and Seneydo Medina Galán reported that over 60,000 hectares of woodland forests in the Bahoruco mountain range, in the Dominican Republic's southwest region, have been destroyed by timber loggers who supposedly have permits from the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources. They said logging has damaged the aquifers that feed local aqueducts, leading to reduced flows in some and the disappearance of others. Timber and charcoal merchants have been accused of excessive logging in the mountain areas, leading to the disappearance of rivers and streams.

The environmentalists mentioned damage to the communities of Enriquillo and Juanchito, in the coastal area of Barahona, where "logging in the mountains has reduced water levels in the wells in this area of great environmental importance," as well as "destruction of forest areas that affects ecosystems" in the communities of Los Pinos del Edén, La Descubierta, San Bartolomé, Duvergé, Angostura, Las Salinas, Cristóbal, and the scientific reserve of the El Rincón Lagoon, in the municipality of Cabra. This is the area where, the environmentalists complained, the Ministry for the Environment has done nothing to halt the destruction of forests.

'A thousand cuts'

In their documentary "Muerte por Mil Cortes" (Death by a thousand cuts), Jake Kheel and Juan Mejía Botero delve into the environmental impact of the massive production of charcoal in the Dominican Republic. The documentary, released this year, focuses on the alarming levels of deforestation in critically important ecosystems across the country. One of the problems the film highlights is the consistent production of charcoal, not only within the Bahoruco National Park, but also in the dry forests surrounding the Lake Enriquillo. The Dominican Republic has exported 16,500 tons of charcoal between 2010 and 2015, the equivalent of 165 containers a year.

Kheel and Mejía Botero, in an article published in *Listín Diario*, said there has been an increase in coal exports to developed countries, where it is used as a luxury item, mostly for outdoor barbecues.

And in an article published by *EnergyWire*, David Ferris and Nate Gronewold, using figures provided by US customs authorities, point out that one of the main industrialized countries that Dominican Republic exports charcoal to is the US. They say that data compiled by the US Census Bureau show that the Dominican Republic "has become a significant source of charcoal for the United States." The data show that US imports of Dominican charcoal in 2014 reached \$533,041, compared to charcoal from Canada, which reached \$634,737 in 2014, and from Brazil at \$525,000 in 2015.

But an important amount of Dominican charcoal goes to Haiti. Kheel told the local press that there is a large-scale charcoal industry involving Dominican and Haitian companies, with a complex distribution system in Haiti. Haiti's forests have been destroyed to the extent that they now cover

less than 2% of the country's total surface area, and as a result the country has become dependent on Dominican charcoal to satisfy demand.

Approximately 80% of Haiti's population uses charcoal for cooking purposes, as charcoal is cheaper than propane gas and not everyone in Haiti has a stove. Most of the charcoal produced with wood from Dominican forests ends up being used in Haitian kitchens and a large percentage of it comes from trees logged illegally by thousands of Haitians who cross the border each week, the filmmakers Kheel and Mejía Botero said ([NotiCen, July 22, 2004](#)).

Disappointed in the reaction

Although Kheel and Mejía Botero have said that they wish to go beyond simply placing a spotlight on the problem, they said they feel disappointed by some of the reactions to their work.

"We feel surprised and saddened by the fact that the immediate reaction of the government bureau responsible for preventing the destruction of the environment, the Ministry for the Environment, has been to reject our findings," they wrote. The Ministry for the Environment has denied that the country's forests are in danger and has stated that forests in the southern part of the country have increased by 45% since 2003.

Kheel and Mejía Botero complain that the Ministry for the Environment has acted defensively and has replied that the adequate management of forests includes granting official permits for the production of charcoal in order to prevent illegal logging. But the filmmakers said that although forests might have increased in recent years, it is important to take into account the impact of logging on the quality of the Dominican Republic's forests.

"Undoubtedly, the country's protected areas and the most critically important ecosystems in terms of providing potable water, soil, and protection for biodiversity have suffered a gradual and consistent degradation over the past few years," they wrote.

In fact, earlier this year, the Secretariat for Environmental Affairs for DR-CAFTA (the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Zone) sent the Dominican government an official letter urging it to take action in the face of failure to comply with the country's own environmental protection laws regarding the Bahoruco national park.

"Muerte por Mil Cortes" is not the first documentary to highlight the issue of illegal logging in the Dominican Republic. *Parques de Papel: Sierra de Bahoruco* (Paper Parks: the Bahoruco Mountain Range) was presented in 2015 by the environmental group SOS Ambiente to the DR-CAFTA's Secretariat for Environmental Affairs, together with geo-referenced maps, interviews, and studies carried out by Kheel and Mejía Botero's environmental organization, Grupo Jaragua.

Dominican authorities have not disclosed the nature of the logging permits and the forest management plans it has approved, environmentalists say, which makes it impossible to compare the number of permits granted with the Dominican Republic's growing volume of charcoal exports.

Environmentalists argue that legalizing charcoal exports is not conducive to the sustainable use of forest resources and places the Ministry for the Environment in a difficult predicament, as it lacks the necessary resources to effectively protect forests. Kheel and Mejía Botero, the filmmakers, say the authorities find themselves having to clamp down on the illegal production of charcoal and also ensure that the legal production of charcoal does not have a detrimental impact on the environment.

“The current management [of forest resources] is not only inadequate, it is totally non-existent,”
Kheel said.

-- End --