

## **The Impact of Deforestation on Paraguay's Chaco**

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*First, they were removed from their lands, then, in recent years, the enormous deforestation of the area they live in practically destroyed the wild fauna and flora that are the basic means of traditional subsistence. Marilin Rehnfeldt. [i]*

In January, the government of Paraguay returned to the Xákmok Kásek community 72 percent of its ancestral lands. [ii] The Sanapaná ethnic group was initially forced out of its territory more than 30 years ago by ranching companies, and as a result, the community has faced extreme poverty during the intervening years. [iii] Many of its members—especially children—have died amid these precarious conditions, deprived of their homes and forgotten by the state. [iv] This is but one of many conflicts left over in the Gran Chaco.

### **What is the Gran Chaco?**

The Gran Chaco is the second largest forest region in the Western Hemisphere. Its geographic characteristics make it one of the most diverse places on the continent. There are thousands of species of plants and animals existing in the area, but even more importantly, it houses an incalculable number of indigenous communities, like the Wichí, Ayoreo, Qom, Sanapaná and others. [v]

The Gran Chaco's territory is split between Paraguay (27 percent), Argentina (61 percent), Brazil (1 percent) and Bolivia (11 percent).[vi] In Paraguay, the Chaco or Occidental region covers 60 percent of the national territory but houses just two percent of its population. Nevertheless, this population is the country's most diverse in social and cultural terms. There are indigenous groups like the Ayoreo-Totobiegosode, who have chosen to live in isolation; as well as Mennonite groups whose ancestors arrived more than 90 years ago; "Brasiguayos," descendants of Brazilian immigrants; and other small groups. [vii]

### **Indigenous peoples vs. large-scale agriculture and ranching**

Paraguay has the sixth-highest deforestation rate in the world, [viii] and the majority of this destruction is concentrated in the Chaco. [ix] Several experts have pointed to the direct connection between large-scale ranching and agriculture and the practices leading to deforestation in the Paraguayan Chaco. "It hurts us to see so much of the land already destroyed in this place. I remember before I was forced out of the forest we used to look for places where the land was undisturbed to take refuge in," lamented a member of the Ayoreo people. [x]

Paraguay is also the sixth-largest beef producer in the world. [xi] The Carlos Casado S.A. and Yaguareté Porã S.A. companies own large swathes of land that are dedicated, in part, to pastures for cattle and the planting of soy and other crops that will serve as feed for the livestock. [xii] Soy is especially popular in the industry, due to its low cost of ranch production. Also, for years, the indigenous communities of the Chaco have denounced illegal logging by these companies. [xiii] Survival International, a non-governmental organization that advocates for the rights of indigenous communities, has even said that these industries, not satisfied with their legally acquired properties, have clear-cut land outside their own territories, threatening the lives behind of the communities that live there. Even more worrisome are the tracks left by heavy machinery, found in areas occupied by indigenous communities living in voluntary isolation. [xiv] “I always tell white people that Eami means ‘Mother’, mother of the Ayoreo. When we see a bulldozer destroying our bushland, it is killing our mother”, says Mateo Sobode Chiquenoi, an indigenous Ayoreo.” [xv]

“Ranching companies have been deforesting indigenous peoples’ lands for years and the Paraguayan government has done little to stop it. The Ayoreo Indians, some of whom are uncontacted, are being hounded by bulldozers that are destroying their forest. Sometimes the companies don’t even have environmental licenses. The Inter-American Commission has ordered the government to put a stop to the deforestation but has so far been ignored,” commented Sarina Kidd, an activist for Latin America at Survival.

### **Actions by the Paraguayan government**

In 2004, the government of Nicanor Duarte approved the Zero Deforestation Law, but this regulation only applies to the Oriental region, not the Chaco. [xvi] Taking into account that the Chaco constitutes the majority of Paraguay’s forest regions, it is a shame that the government has decided not to apply the law in this region. Meanwhile, Survival International has asked the Paraguayan state to be more careful in handing out environmental licenses and the regulation of these licenses.

In February, the government of President Horacio Cartes announced a reforestation program in the Chaco. While such a policy is encouraging, we must emphasize that native resources continue to be lost and often cannot be recovered through a reforestation campaign. Furthermore, this is the same government that has been expanding meat exportation since taking power in 2013, causing irreparable damages to its forests and showing little political will. The state must, in addition to the reforestation policy, direct its energy towards policies for environmental abuse prevention and seek to improve the regulation of environmental licenses. These combined efforts could ultimately prevent both the loss of the Chaco’s biodiversity and the suffering of indigenous communities that, despite years of struggle, still do not enjoy the exercise of full sovereignty over their ancestral territory.

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