

Deforestation and Environmental Crisis in Modern Argentina

Adrián Gustavo Zarrilli

At the time of Argentinian independence, towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were 160 million hectares of original forest, wood, and jungle in Argentina. In less than two centuries, the country lost over two-thirds of its native forest and, today, contains fewer than 33 million hectares of native forest. The exploitation of this extraordinary Argentinian forest wealth is the starting point for this proposal, which aims at drawing an interpretative chart—from a historical-environmental point of view—of the evolution of forest exploitation from 1880 up to today, and its relation to the expansion of the model of capitalist accumulation in Argentina.

The exploitation and demand of forest products in the country have overcome the limits of forest sustainability, resulting in the degradation and reduction of the forested area. The domestic use of wood, the expansion of railways and communications, the demand for agriculture, fuel for emerging industries, the use of tannin in tanneries, and the large growth in construction illustrate a growing demand—one that has imposed a rhythm of extraction and a manner of exploitation that neither took the maintenance of regenerative mechanisms or biodiversity into account, nor respected the culture of the native peoples settled there.

The main axis of this proposal is the historical-environmental analysis of this process of exploitation of Argentinian forest resources within the context of the country's incorporation into the international market. The project further examines the relationship established between this deforestation process and the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the artificial transformation of the forests, their interaction and progressive deterioration, the conflicts triggered by this, the rationale, and the degrees of specialization.

The approach taken in this study is the carrying out of a process of interrelation between the environmental and social changes, especially the social, cultural, and political effects, and the environmental factors that stand behind these transformations.

The general purpose of this project is, then, for it to become a contribution to the understanding of the social-environmental impact of the deforestation process in Argentina—i.e., its material, political, and cultural impacts.