

## **The Great Chaco and Yungas Rainforests**

The Yungas Rainforest and the Great Chaco American forest are two neighbouring ecosystems. They are rich in biodiversity and wildlife, such as rare jaguars. However, these forests are being destroyed at one of the fastest rates in the world (1). The deforestation rate of the Chaco forest of northern Argentina, is up to six times higher than the world average (2).

The rate of this destruction has accelerated since 1996, when Monsanto introduced genetically engineered soya beans into Argentina. Since then, the country has extended its agricultural frontiers to grow genetically engineered soya for export as animal feed, at the expense of its threatened forests, wildlife and the homes and livelihoods of many people (3).

### **The Great Chaco Forest**

Over one million square kilometres in size, the Great Chaco forest is the second biggest ecosystem on the American continent, after the Amazon. It stretches across four countries: Argentina (61%), Paraguay (25%), Bolivia (14%) and Brazil (0.1%). It is one of the richest areas of biodiversity on Earth (4). The Chaco is divided into the Humid Chaco to the east, and the Semi Arid Chaco to the west. The forest encompasses areas of diverse ecological characteristics. It has savannah regions and very densely forested areas known as 'Impenetrables', in which there is no surface water. Species that live and grow in the Chaco forest tolerate temperatures that soar to above 50°C in the summer.

Around four million people live in the Chaco forest (5), most of them indigenous people who depend on the forest for food and water. For hundreds of years, forest inhabitants have hunted armadillos, peccaries and deer that live in the forest, from which they derive their only source of protein. The honey made by wasps and bees of the Chaco forest is of great quality. Losing the forest's resources affects not only local people's diet, but also a concrete business opportunity, as Argentina is the biggest honey exporter in the world.

Many varieties of precious hard wood trees grow in the Chaco forest, such as the Iron Wood tree, used to make 'sleepers' for railways around the world. Other hard woods include the Algarrobo and the Itin. When the forests are cleared to make way for soya, these trees are often burnt or illegally sold. This leads to huge economic losses. If the forest was properly managed, jobs could be created in sustainable forestry, and the environmental damage caused by deforestation and soya monoculture could be avoided.

### **The Yungas Rainforest**

The Yungas, also known as the 'Clouded Rainforest' or 'Mountain Rainforest', stretches across seventy thousand square kilometres of Argentina, towards Venezuela and along the Andes, to the north. The Yungas lies in the western ecological border of the Chaco forest and is much more humid. Several thousand people from over seven different ethnic groups live in the Yungas Rainforest.

The Yungas is considered an international hot spot for biodiversity by international bodies, such as the World Rainforest Institute. Rare wildlife, such as jaguars, live in the forest and a variety of tree species grow there. Forty tree species are exclusive to the lower Yungas, 10 of which have a high commercial value, such as cedar and oak. (6)

The Yungas is threatened by illegal logging and, increasingly, to its lowlands being converted into agricultural land for genetically engineered soya. In November 2002, UNESCO declared an area of the Yungas a Biosphere Reserve. However, the reserve was deforested the very same month. Today, less than 1% of the lower Yungas is protected and none of the areas with agricultural potential have protected status.

In the last seven years, more than 10,000 hectares a year have been lost to soya in the lower Yungas forest alone (7). It is illegal to log the forest's valuable tree species, but police and local

authorities in the region are doing nothing to prevent the genetically engineered soya industry clear cutting the land.

### **Wildlife in the Yungas and Chaco Forests**

The Yungas and Chaco forests are home to jaguars, *panther onca palustris*, the top predator on the American continent. The jaguar is central to legends of the area and is worshiped by many tribes. Once, the jaguar population of Argentina extended as far as Patagonia but today, these populations have been devastated by hunting and the loss of habitat due to deforestation and are close to extinction.

The Yungas is the only place in the world in which eight different species of the feline family share the same territory: jaguars; pumas; onzas; magrae; tigrinas; geofrogy cats; and two smaller species of wild cats. Other species that live in the forests include: collared peccaries; brown brocket and red brocket deer; six banded armadillos; parrots; tucans; and bats. There are also many snake species in the area, such as the rainbow boa and the famous lanpalagua boa, which reaches up to ten metres long.

The Chaco forest is home to the giant armadillo, *tatú carreta*, which is facing extinction. When these forests are destroyed, any wildlife in the bulldozers' path is shot. Armadillos and other, smaller mammals, are frequently burned along with the groups of fallen trees, stacked up along the newly deforested fields.

### **The solution**

Greenpeace demands an end to genetically engineered organisms and supports sustainable agriculture.

In Argentina, Greenpeace is also campaigning for a two-year moratorium on forest conversion, while the problems caused by land conversion are addressed:

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1. Land Planning: A New Land Planning Programme must be established so that Argentina's forests can be saved and become productive areas again under sustainable regulations for both people and biodiversity.
2. Land Tenure Regulation: All indigenous people and 'campesinos' must be given the right to legally own sufficient land to enable them to work and feed both themselves and their families.

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1. The world deforestation rate for 1990-2000 (Puyravaud, 2003) is -0.23. In some areas of the Chaco, it rises to -2.19 and to -0.81 in the Yungas.
  2. Forest Map of Salta Province Updated 2002. Management Unit of the Forest Assessment System. Secretary for the Environment and Sustainable Development, page 17.
  3. Argentinean Agriculture, Livestock, Fishing & Food Secretariat (SAGPYA), Food Industry Direction, Food National Department, Analysis of the Soy oil food chain, March 2004. [http://www.alimentosargentinos.gov.ar/0-3/olea/Aceite\\_Soja\\_r19/A\\_soja.htm](http://www.alimentosargentinos.gov.ar/0-3/olea/Aceite_Soja_r19/A_soja.htm), Resolution N° 017/04 of the Forest Faculty Council of the National University of Santiago del Estero, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004.
  4. According to The Nature Conservancy, WWF and Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina, "Ecoregional Evaluation for the Great Chaco American", article downloaded on July 2004. <http://www.vidasilvestre.org.ar/bosques/granchaco.asp>
  5. Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina, The Nature Conservancy and WWF, Press Release, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004.
  6. ProYungas Foundation, "Selva Pedomontana de las Yungas en el Umbral de la Extinción", page 12, Tucumán, 2001.
  7. Fundación Pro-Yungas. "Desarrollo Sustentable en Las Yungas de la Alta Cuenca del Río Bermejo", La certificación Forestal como alternativa de producción y conservación. April 2003.