

Forest Fires Pose Serious Threat

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SAN JOSE, May - Forest fires are a veritable plague in Central America, one of the regions with the greatest biodiversity on the planet, and one of the poorest as well.

Every year, fires threaten the 18.1 million hectares of forest found in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, which are home to an estimated seven percent of the world's biodiversity.

"The situation is quite serious, and the worst thing of all is that the great majority of the forest fires have been purposely set," Sonia Lobo, at Costa Rica's Environment Ministry, told IPS.

Among the causes of the fires is the slash-and-burn technique used by farmers to clear agricultural land out of forests. There are also acts of vengeance among peasant farmers, who occasionally set fire to each other's land as part of a feud, as well as fires sparked by poachers.

"Farmers often clear their land using intentionally set fires, which frequently get out of control, causing enormous ecological damages," said Lobo.

Official studies indicate that the impact in the region is dramatic. Last year, 53,500 hectares of forests burned down in 1,884 separate fires in Honduras alone.

But the fires do not only destroy and pollute the environment -- the fauna and flora, water, air and soil. Thousands of Central America's 36 million people lose their land, their crops and their homes every year as well, and suffer respiratory and other health problems as a result of the toxic smoke.

Fires destroy around 40,000 hectares of forest every year in Costa Rica, according to the latest statistics on the question, which were compiled for a workshop organised last August in Honduras by the Central American Commission on the Environment and Development (CCAD), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 2002, nearly 1,000 forest fires broke out in Guatemala, 5,300 in Nicaragua, and between five and six in each of tiny Belize's nature reserves.

The main causes of the loss of natural resources in Central America are the advance of the agricultural frontier, forest fires, and the introduction of exotic species, Enrique Lahmann, the director for Mesoamerica (Central America and southern Mexico) of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), said in an interview with IPS.

He said the negative impact of the forest fires could be significantly reduced within a short time frame by launching prevention programmes and awareness-raising campaigns.

"The governments take a more reactive than a proactive stance," said Lahmann, who noted that the fires were not only the business of environment authorities, but of the ministries of security and justice as well, which should locate and hold accountable those who are responsible for intentionally setting fires.

In some cases, governments in the region have set up specialised units of firefighters to combat blazes in the forests.

But authorities complain of a lack of funds, which means one of the main forces combating the flames are brigades of volunteer firefighters.

A fire that was apparently set by poachers in Costa Rica recently burned for three weeks, destroying 4,000 hectares of jungle -- 40 percent of the Caño Negro Biological Reserve in the northern part of the country.

The fire spread rapidly in the forests and wetlands of the nature reserve located near the Nicaraguan border, killing thousands of turtles, alligators, snakes, deer, rabbits, raccoons and birds.

The main suspects are a group of poachers who allegedly set the fire in retaliation for stiffened surveillance and security measures adopted by the park authorities.

According to the Costa Rican Environment Ministry, it will take the jungle 40 years to recover from the disaster.

"The countries that have been hardest hit in the last few months have been Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua," forestry engineer Wilfrán Murillo, Costa Rica's national coordinator of fire management, explained to IPS.

Murillo said that what is needed are campaigns to train small farmers in fire management and in more efficient agricultural methods.

"If the impact on the environment continues to grow, we will not survive. Everyone must become aware of the serious problems created by fires," he underlined.

In January, February and March alone, authorities in Guatemala counted a total of 177 forest fires that destroyed 13,000 hectares in the northern Guatemalan department of Petén.

Besides being one of the areas of Central America with the greatest biodiversity, Petén, located along the border with Mexico, boasts a large part of the cultural legacy left by the Mayan Indians, including important pre-Hispanic monuments.

"The problem is more serious than people think," Guatemalan expert Jorge Cabrera, former executive secretary of CCAD (the Central American Commission on the Environment and Development), remarked to IPS.

Cabrera said the biggest impact was felt by species found in broad-leaved forests. He was recently amazed and shocked to see an eagle in the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula, a sign that it had been forced to migrate to a heavily populated urban area due to the loss of habitat.

Many economists say the region's biodiversity is a treasure that, managed in a sustainable manner, can bolster development and economic growth in Central America and thus help reduce the poverty in which a majority of the population lives.

But a conflict arises between poverty and ecology, because many poor families migrate to the jungles to clear out farms or ranches, using the slash-and-burn technique.

"The main consequences are the loss of biodiversity, the ecological imbalance, global warming, and the loss of hope for a better future," said Cabrera. (END/2003)