Lithuanian people who have historically revered trees and nature, are now facing IKEA-lead ecocide

For thousands of years, the ancient tree forests in Lithuania have been venerated by people as a sacred and integral part of the ecosystem, while chopping down one old-grown tree was akin to killing a human being. Now those same sacred trees which each generation carefully passed onto the next may be warehoused, chemically treated, and reduced to an assemble-yourself package in an IKEA store.

Within the UN Climate Conference COP28, the dire issue of ecocide in Lithuania has been overlooked and has become an illustration of the contradictions in the climate policies of the EU. While the region aims to position itself as global leaders in just transition at the global stage, the EU is struggling to protect the environment in its Baltic region.

IKEA advertisements parody created by artists of Miško Festivalis / Miško Festival

Sacredness of Nature – not a jointly subscribed value in the EU

In many indigenous pre-Christian Baltic spiritualities and mythologies rivers, trees and springs were revered as holy. Trees were considered to serve as mediums between deities and the pagan priests (lt. *kriviai, žyniai*). Meanwhile the souls which inhabit the trees were highly respected.

“Ancient forests are important both culturally and spiritually — the heroes of fairy tales and fantasy books do not live and work where forests are cleared. Old-growth forests also hold high significance to human’s spiritual life and relaxation” said Dr.

Mindaugas Lapelė, Board member of Ancient Woods Foundation (lt. Sengirės Fondas).

Of course, the comprehension of the sacredness of nature is not unique to Lithuania — it echoes globally, from the Amazon's indigenous communities who hold forests as the key to local spirituality and culture, to Palestinians who share a deep bond with the olive trees, which symbolize their deep connection to the land. For those in the modern days still in touch with their ancestral heritage of Nature protection, the ongoing ecocide is causing great distress wherever it takes place.

The Swedish furniture giant, exploiting the vulnerabilities of politicians' ignorance and corruption, has turned Lithuania into its second largest wood supplier, accelerating deforestation across previously protected areas, often under the disguise of "sanitary clearings". Local NGO Forest Swan (lt. Girių spiečius) has issued a statement calling the ministry to halt the permission given to 565 areas to be cleared while local artists have turned to different creative ways to highlight the issue. A notable recent legal victory has been achieved by the Public Interest Defense Fund (lt. Viešojo intereso gynimo fondas), which aimed to prevent deforestation in protected areas. The extended panel of judges of the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania issued a final decision this month on the legality of major forest logging in "Natura 2000" territories, which are legally protected under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives, and yet were still being cut. This follows the European Commission's lawsuit against Romania for mass illegal logging of natural forests, which was launched following a complaint by charity ClientEarth. However, in the long-term perspective the civic society cannot continuously fill in the gaps for the lack of law enforcement.

Lack of enforced regulations against ecocide in the EU

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), since 1990, 420 million hectares of forest have been lost worldwide. This is roughly the same amount as the area the size of the entire EU. There are some positive developments: last month the Parliament and Council reached a provisional political agreement on the EU nature restoration law, which aims to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030.

This follows another EU regulation aimed at preventing deforestation in supply chains adopted in Spring. However, the situation in Lithuania reveals a troubling gap between policy-making and implementation.

“There is no effectively working institution in Lithuania that could help local communities in case of suspicious logging. For this matter the NGO “Forest Inspection” was created. We are building a platform where the people could report illegal logging activities, get help and instructions on how to react in these cases and what could be done to prevent forest from being destruction”, said local activist Laurynas Žemaitis.

It should be mentioned that IKEA, for its part, insists on using only Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified or recycled wood as a way to showcase its *ethical* commitment. But investigations from watchdog groups like Earthsight have uncovered continuous violations and raised questions about the efficacy of FSC certification, which some activists have described as “death stamps” for forests. Inspired by its neighbor Latvia, where part of state-owned forests lost FSC certification, some Lithuanian activists argue that losing the certification could help preserve the trees.

Looking ahead

The Lithuanian Environmental Ministry, which publicly expressed support for the UN SDGs has been renamed by locals as ‘Environmental Exploitation Ministry’ and the minister, whose party is in the majority coalition, has faced calls for resignation over his continuous prioritization of short term economic gains at the cost of destruction of nature. Recently, some national parliament members have initiated a vote on an advisory national referendum on restrictions and prohibition of forest cutting in protected areas. It was voted down by the parties in the ruling coalition.

If the situation does not immediately change, irreversible damage to biodiversity may be inflicted. “Each old-grown tree is like a separate ecosystem with an abundance of microhabitats (dry branches, bark cracks, etc.) important for both common and endangered species. Today, the reason behind 36% of the 566 species listed in the Red Book of Lithuania is deforestation, traditional forest management, and the loss of mature forests.” said Mindaugas Lapelė.

The situation in Lithuania is a microcosm of a larger issue faced in the EU and worldwide: balancing economic interests with those of people and the planet. Even if the dire situation in Lithuania is solved, without fundamental change in mindset and regulation, it will just end up in another country. For example, the World Bank has published a fancy worded report on Bhutan, highlighting that Bhutan is the only carbon negative country in the world and criticizing it for having only 7.3 percent of

the forest area under commercial management.

For humanity to preserve planetary health, we must ensure that ancient forests are protected. Besides addressing systemic issues like corruption, ineffective certification systems, and the influence of lobbying, it also requires a fundamental shift in whether we view Nature as a resource to be exploited or as a sacred and integral part of the planet. Whether we use arguments based in indigenous knowledge or that of environmental law, we must ensure that ancient forests are protected.

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