

UNSUSTAINABLE LIVESTOCK AND FEEDSTOCK FARMING: ONE OF THE DRIVERS OF DEFORESTATION AND FOREST DEGRADATION

CONTEXT

Deforestation and forest degradation can be successfully tackled, and forest conservation and restoration enhanced, by tackling the real underlying causes of forest loss. One of those underlying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation is unsustainable livestock and feedstock farming that not only impacts on forests, the climate and the environment, it also has very real impacts on communities, Indigenous Peoples, peasants and women. Already, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has stated that the global livestock industry is “probably the largest sectoral source of water pollution,” and one of the key agents of deforestation. [1]

As global demand for meat grows, 80 percent [2] of the growth in livestock production is concentrated within the large-scale, corporate, industrial system, pushing out small-scale livestock keepers. The industrial livestock production model prospers on the use of intensified feedstock production in the form of soy, corn and other monocultures, genetically modified crops and government subsidies to agribusiness. “Globally, about 98 percent of soy meal is used as feed for farmed animals.” [3] This is most pronounced in Latin America where, according to the FAO, “the greatest amount of deforestation is occurring – 70 percent of previous forested land in the Amazon is occupied by pastures, and feedcrops cover a large part of the remainder.” [4]

IMPACTS ON BIODIVERSITY, CLIMATE AND COMMUNITIES

Deforestation as a result of the growth of industrial animal agriculture is a compound problem, reducing available habitat for wildlife, decreasing water quality in streams and rivers, lowering ecosystems’ resilience to the effects of climate change, and threatening the livelihoods and rights of Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent communities. [5]

- Ten percent of the world’s plant and animal species that face some degree of threat are experiencing habitat loss based on livestock production. [6]
- According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), the most important drivers of biodiversity loss are habitat change, climate change, invasive alien species, overexploitation, and pollution. Livestock production and intensification contributes to all of these drivers. [7]
- Of the world’s 35 biodiversity “hotspots” containing the highest levels of endemic species that have lost 70 percent or more of their original habitat, 23 are affected by livestock production. [8] [9]
- The livestock sector is the single largest anthropogenic user of land. Grazing occupies 26 percent of the Earth’s terrestrial surface, while feed crop production requires about a third of all arable land. [10]
- FAO estimated that livestock production is responsible for 14.5 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, a bigger share than that of transport. [11] It accounts for 5 percent of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, most of it due to expansion of pastures and arable land for feed crops. [12] The livestock sector also emits 44 percent of anthropogenic methane emissions and 53 percent of anthropogenic nitrous oxide emissions; both of these greenhouse gases are much more powerful warming agents than carbon dioxide.” [13]
- Indigenous Peoples, forest dwellers, peasants, and local communities have numerous testimonies of the impacts of unsustainable livestock production on their lives, from loss of land, displacement, loss of livelihood, destruction of the environment, poor working conditions, numerous health problems and at times, violent repression from large agri-business landowners. [14]

CONCLUSIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

There are numerous alternatives to the current model of unsustainable livestock production. These include small-scale, integrated, agro-ecological farming systems and traditional pastoralism that have a sustainable relationship with nature and respect social and cultural values including the role of women in food production. According to a report by the former Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food, “agroecology, if sufficiently supported, can double food production in entire regions within 10 years while mitigating climate change and alleviating rural poverty.” [15]

Moreover, for the sake of the world’s forests it is essential to address patterns of overconsumption and overproduction and move towards more sustainable food systems that contribute to equitably sharing the resources of this planet and to daily diets that put a priority on plant-based foods: vegetables, fruit, grains and legumes.

The views expressed in this information product are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of FAO.

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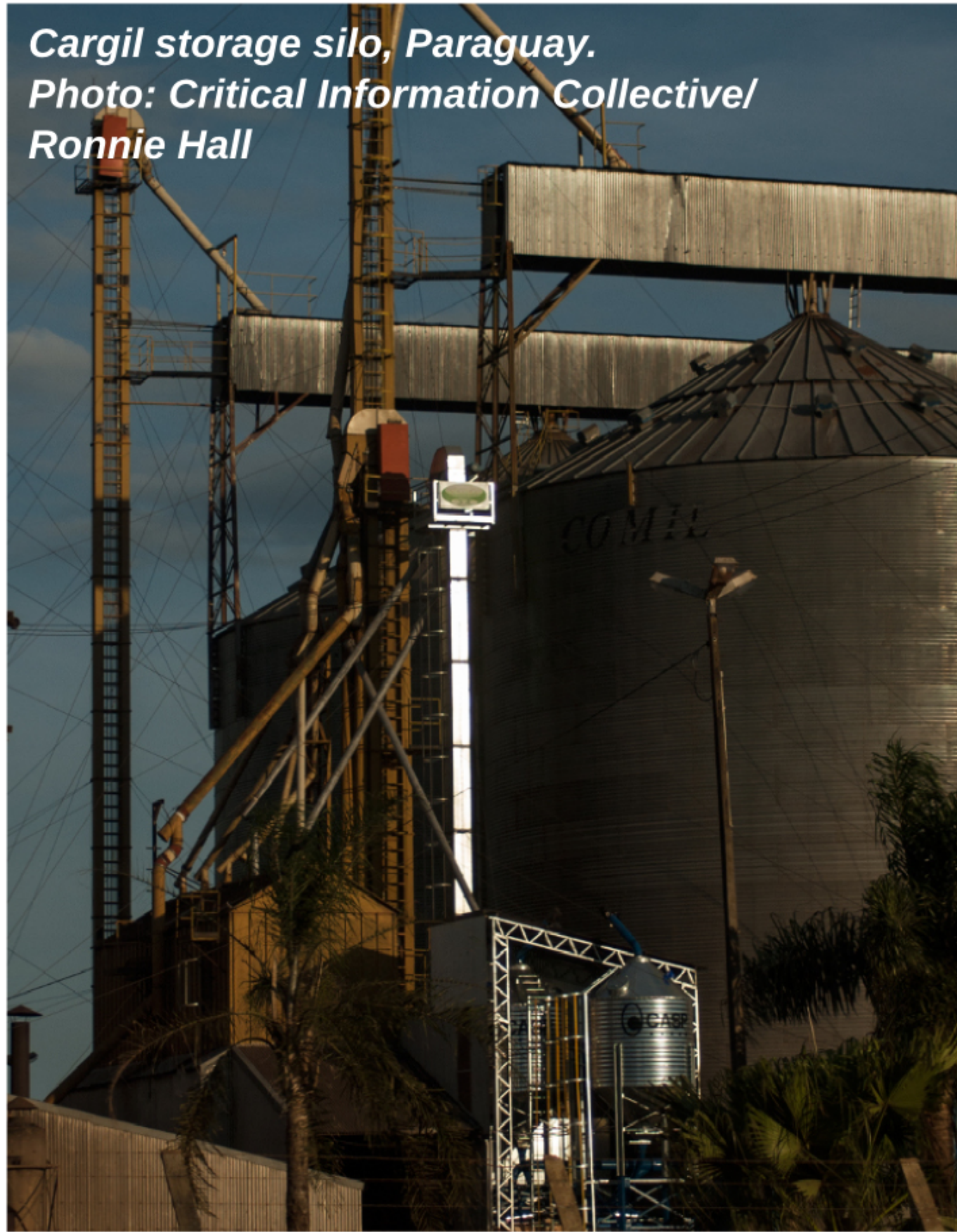
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Community impacted by soy plantations, Paraguay.
Photo: Critical Information Collective/Vicki Hird



Deforestation for livestock feed, Paraguay.
Photo: Critical Information Collective/Vicki Hird



Cargil storage silo, Paraguay.
Photo: Critical Information Collective/Ronnie Hall

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