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Participatory Research and Land Use Management in the Atlantic Rainforest Biosphere Reserve: The Case of the Tobacco Farmers in Atalanta - Santa Catarina - Brazil

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Abstract

Brazil is the world's largest tobacco leaf exporter and the second biggest producer. Almost all of it is grown in the south of Brazil, including the state of Santa Catarina (SC). There, tobacco farming has established itself as the main "cash crop" of predominantly small-scale, family-run farms that are part of an integrated production system. This has been associated with land degradation, poverty and health problems. Although Brazil has enacted stringent environmental regulations, enforcement is extremely difficult because of the large number of tobacco farmers contributing to deforestation. The uncontrolled cutting down of native wood to cure tobacco is the major cause for man-induced land degradation in the region.

This study was carried out within the framework of reforestation activities performed, in Atalanta (SC), by APREMAVI, a local NGO promoting forest conservation by fostering alternative forms of land-use for rural landowners. Current land use management practices as well as farmers' living conditions were investigated in-depth. Socio-economic problems were assumed to be the fundamental root of environmental degradation. Therefore, emphasis was given to integrating social science components into research on land-use management in order to understand the social dynamics that underlie the process of degradation.

The study demonstrates that successful reforestation and land-use changes on private properties rely on active involvement of the beneficiaries in each step of the process. A dialogue between farmers, practitioners and environmental scientists in which the participants' problems, views, expectations, and fears are expressed is imperative.

Through this approach, a process of reciprocal trust, respect and learning set in motion farmers' self-critique and rethinking concerning the use and protection of private land in the Atlantic Rainforest. The main achievements of this work were the changes in attitudes of farmers that are prerequisites for a movement towards better socioeconomic and environmental conditions. Final recommendations on further research and suggestions for improving land-use management on the local level in the Atlantic Rainforest Biosphere Reserve are provided.

Keywords: Atlantic Rainforest, communication, land-use management, participation, reforestation, tobacco cultivation

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