

Fundación Montescola y Brigadas deseucaliptizadoras





Constellation
of the Commons

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Person interviewed

Joám Evans Pin

Interviewer

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco

Translated by

Loren Friedman

Website

www.asturiassostenible.org/



Who are you and where are we?

I am Joám Evans. We are in Froxán, which is a small village of six houses, in Galicia. It is one of 30,000 villages in Galicia, and like many others, it has a community of neighboring woodlands held in common hands, which is a communal territory. Here I am a *comunero* [community member], I am the secretary of the Community and I am also the director of the Montescola Foundation, which is a non-profit that is headquartered here in Froxán.

What kind of projects are the Brigadas Deseucaliptizadoras and what is their relationship with the Verdegaiá Association?

Within the broader context of Froxán's collaboration with different entities, in 2018 a project was launched called Las Brigadas Deseucaliptizadoras. It is a project that started here in Froxán with the Verdegaiá Association, which is an environmental organization with a Galicia-wide scope. And that is where this collaboration came from and continues to this day. Verdegaiá has been in existence for more than two decades, and in all that time it has had multiple environmental defense activities, both legal and in the face of specific projects, as well as education, awareness-raising, different types of work and through different commissions. And within all this work, the Brigades is an initiative focused on environmental volunteering.

Some media outlets state that the Brigades started after the wave of fires in the fall of 2016, can you explain these beginnings?

Here, in Froxán, we had a [forest] fire in 2016. And after that fire we started to do environmental volunteer work, on a very small scale, but already with a dynamic that was gaining strength, and as a result of that experience, which turned out to be very positive, we contacted Verdegaiá with the idea of, "why not do what we are doing right not in our community but more broadly?" So that more communities and more people can join this type of environmental volunteering. We launched this proposal precisely in around the end of 2017, amidst devastating fires, both in Galicia and Portugal, fires which also affected urban areas such as Vigo, which is the largest city in Galicia, and Verdegaiá accepted, and the initiative was finally launched. The first call for the Brigades, which are, in short, a way for people to get together to work on the land, was on April 18, to attempt to do something to change the situation we had found ourselves in over the previous year.

For those who do not know about the subject, can you explain why eucalyptus is a problem in Galicia?

It has been very problematic, first of all because of its extension. The last forest survey shows that there are already more than half a million hectares, which is a very high percentage of the land. Additionally, there

are other mixed masses of trees, which are not even plantations, but simply masses where, due to its invasive nature, eucalyptus has been gaining ground. And this is in addition to other pyrophyte species also present and other invasive species, such as acacia, which generate a breeding ground for fires that, especially given the greater context of climate change, are unpredictable, of much larger dimensions than those we were used to (we are talking about 6th generation fires). Therefore, eucalyptus is very difficult to deal with in terms of extinction, and we must talk about prevention. And prevention means, for us, recovering the native forest.

What kind of business is the eucalyptus industry in Galicia? Who benefits from its cultivation?

The eucalyptus business began during Franco's dictatorship, when one of the first pulp and paper pulp mills, Ence, a national company, was planned and installed in Galicia, in Pontevedra. Obviously, when this industry is installed in Pontevedra, it automatically generates a need to access raw material, which is eucalyptus for that pulp, and so "eupcaliptization" begins. In fact, right now we are also at a critical moment, because apart from the plant, which has already existed for decades in Pontevedra, there is a new project for a new pulp mill, by Altri, in the interior of Galicia, in Palas de Rei, which could mean that a relatively well-preserved area, which has retained many natural values, could be subjected to the pressure of forest extractivism, through more eucalyptus monocultures. And eucalyptus is a pyrophyte species, it consumes enormous quantities of water, it also generates what has been called green deserts, because although it has the appearance of a forest, the biodiversity in these plantations, in these monocultures, is very low, and also, because of its own characteristics, let's say because of the chemicals contained in the eucalyptus tree, because of the chemicals contained in the leaf litter and so on, it has an adverse effect on the soil, on the capacity of other organisms to regenerate in the undergrowth, and for the same reason, it also favors fires, and after fires it spreads and grows much faster than any other native species.

How does eucalyptus cultivation affect the destructuring of the land?

Well, we have to think that in Galicia, until the 1940s, which is when the dictatorship introduced forced afforestation through the State forestry patrimony, the millenary system was that of agro-silvo-pastoral exploitation, that is a sustainable combination of forestry, livestock, especially for self-consumption, and the use of what we call "green manure" to fertilize the fields. Then, this system collapsed with the expropriation, with the usurpation of the surrounding, communally-owned forests and their planting them at the service of the State and of these monoculture tree plantations... and with that the whole system was deconstructed, right? So, in the 1940s, many of the forests did not really have trees, but were a mosaic of areas with native forest, wetlands, pastures, scrubland areas, and with that diversity of animals in semi-freedom, such as wild horses, goats, sheep, cows, obviously, and that was a style of exploitation in which fires were hardly relevant, because there was control of the biomass. Besides, this was combined with cereal crop cycles in areas of forest that were periodically plowed. There was no problem, as we have now, of having huge continuous areas of thousands of hectares of monospecific forests, with only eucalyptus, and sometimes also with very poor management.

When we refer to the Brigades, we are basically talking about groups of volunteers who come to Galicia to clear the forests of eucalyptus and

other noxious plants. Is it correct to think of the Brigades as a political project to reclaim the communal lands and their particular articulation of management, governance and distribution of common resources?

Yes, every summer the debate about fires and forest policy comes up, and whose fault it is. So we were a little tired of the fact that, when this type of discussion came up, there was almost never a proactive option, so that people could do something to transform these realities that exist across the area. So, the brigades are a positive proposal because, let's say, they create contact, they unite people who want to put their work to change that reality, and the communities, like ours, and many others, who also want to see that transformation in their lands, but who can benefit from the collaboration of the work of these volunteers, right? Not only for the material aspect, but also the symbolic, and almost the emotional aspect, of people supporting something that is not always easy to undertake. The brigades unite both the communities that manage the territories, most of which are neighboring forests in common ownership, and the people who want to help.

I read on your website that the Brigades also aim to build community and recover popular Galician traditions such as the roga and the albaroque. What are these traditions and why are they important?

Well, first of all, we should clarify that the brigades are not just about work. In fact, they are based on two traditional Galician concepts, which probably have equivalents in many other cultures. These are the roga, which is an appeal or a call, a summons, to community and collective work, and the albaroque, which is a celebration, a party, a meal, which follows. It is something that has been done for many generations. And the brigades incorporate these two concepts, this idea, so when we get together we do work, don't we? And it can be work of many kinds, from cutting eucalyptus or acacias, to doing the shelling, planting in the winter, in short, different kinds of activities, but then there is also that playful, convivial part, of being together, of discussing, of having fun, of having a party, and this is what we believe also keeps people coming back, not only because they see that their work has immediate and long-term results on the territory, but also because it is a forum, a forum or a community for the exchange of ideas and opinions, which people value very much. And in terms of participation, there is really a great diversity. There are people who come from the cities, and therefore perhaps have less contact with forest areas and so on. But there are also people from other communities who also give something back. Just as we go to work in other places, these people also come, and a community and a series of links are forged. Then there are people of all ages, from small children to older people, and there is always work for any type of person, ability, condition or physical shape, and in that sense it is a totally inclusive project.

How many brigades are there?

There have been brigades in all four provinces, not in all the counties, but in all the territory. Obviously there are places where the brigades depend not so much on the organization that, let's say, gives legal coverage to the project, but above all on the local hosts, be it a community of neighboring forests, a neighborhood association, or a local environmental association. So, the fact that there are meetings in a certain place is based on the premise that the local host organizes it, provides the food, organizes the work. So, of course, there are places where there has been a dynamic for six or seven years, when the project started, and almost every three or four

months they organize one, or every two months, as is the case here, in Froxán, and other places where it is more difficult and maybe they organize one a year. So, it depends a lot on the local host. In other words, the project as such does not impose or organize the work on the ground, but facilitates the logistics, insurance and, let's say, all that apparatus for people to get in touch and make these projects a reality.

What do you have to do to become a volunteer?

Well, it's very easy. People sign up on the web page of the Desucalyzing Brigades, there is a form, and from there that person receives each "call", which can be one, two, three, four a month and, let's say, indicating the place, the date, what is going to be done and then he/she can sign up or not. We started with very few people, about fifty, now we are more than one thousand four hundred and, fortunately, more and more people are signing up, and that also makes it very rare for a call to be deserted, for nobody to come. There are always at least ten or fifteen people who will always sign up for one of them. We have even had almost a "gajillion" (laughs).

How do local inhabitants perceive the work of the Brigades?

I believe that in many places it helps, not only in material terms, but also in terms of self-esteem, because sometimes people give little value to the forest, or see it as impossible because of the difficulties involved in the challenge of eliminating eucalyptus and acacias; it is a lot of work. Sometimes it is difficult to even imagine how to go about it. So, when people come from outside with courage, with the strength to help, I believe that it does make a difference, and emotionally it is important to motivate people to continue, and to give support to these transforming initiatives in order to create a different landscape, let's say, promoting biodiversity, the recovery of habitats and ecosystems.

I understand that the Brigades work to clear the forests of noxious plants; are these forests state-owned, private or communal lands?

The brigades act on the land where we are called to. So, in many cases, they are "montes vecinales", which are a type of communal land particular to the Iberian northwest. In Portugal they also exist, they are called baldíos. In some cases, very few, they are private owners, that is, individual or family properties, and in some cases they are also lands belonging to environmental associations that carry out land stewardship projects, have ceded lands, or have bought them, and there we can also intervene if these entities request the collaboration of the brigades.

Should we understand the Deseucaliptizadoras Brigades as an exponent of a broad movement promoting political and civil awareness of territorial rights?

Yes, and in fact it was very interesting; the year after launching the Brigades, the Academia Galega de la Lengua always designates a Galician word of the year, and that year, in 2019, was "deseucaliptización", and that I think says a lot about how the initiative, let's say, has taken root in society. And in fact, the fact that people are organizing to de-eucalyptusize, and that this generates a movement that even goes beyond this initiative and there are, let's say, de-eucalyptusization days in many places, which have nothing to do with the brigades, but they do an equally great job, says a lot and has also created a public image problem for companies like Ence, which sell the goodness of eucalyptus, and try

to minimize its social and environmental negativities. And this, obviously, makes people think about eucalyptus removal, not only as a specific intervention in specific territories, but as an objective, as the focus of a social movement.

Has there been any improvement in the forests as a result of the intervention of the Brigades?

Well, here it is relative because, of course, if we look at the global panorama and see that in the last decades eucalyptus has advanced in hundreds of thousands of hectares, that there are more than half a million hectares in Galicia, we can cry, can't we? But then there is another story of change, a positive story, which is that in those communities where we have been intervening for the last six years, the presence of eucalyptus has been drastically reduced. In Froxán, which is a forest of 100 hectares, in seven years some 40 hectares of eucalyptus have been eliminated, and a very small percentage remains. So, here the change is concrete, real, material, and we can see it, we can see it in the landscape, we can see the change of seasons, when before we saw, of course, the eucalyptus does not change throughout the year, it is totally monotonous, and that has been achieved with this work. Here we can see the change, and in other places where we have been working for years as well.

Another of the activities which the Brigades are involved in is the declaration of rights of the Tins river. I have read that this initiative is driven by the ReNatur_Outes project, the Serra Outes City Council, three public universities in Galicia and two Foundations: Centro de Estudios Euroregionales Galicia-North Portugal and Montescola. Can you tell us when, where and why this initiative was born?

It is part of a project in which the Montescola Foundation participates, in a City Council that is next door, in Outes. It was a project, well it is a project, it is still working, of river renaturalization of an urban section of a river, obviously, very affected by an urban development that over several decades has been growing with its back to the river, without considering it and without integrating it into the urban fabric. And Montescola, in that project involving the three Galician universities, apart from the City Council, we were trying to facilitate, apart from volunteering, which is something we love to do, participation and governance. So, we started at the beginning of 2023 with a session in which we invited the people of Outes, fifty people representing different entities, to imagine how they would like to see the river Tins, which is the river that runs through the center of Outes, in 20 years. Many ideas came out about expectations, about ideas, or the river's own problems, and the question of rights came out, in a totally organic way. There were people who imagined that in 20 years the Tins river would be a subject of rights, and this in the broader context of discussions on the rights of nature. From this idea, advancing in this participatory process, the proposal to elaborate a Declaration of Rights of the Tins River arose. Reality: a Declaration of Rights of the River, and of the responsibilities of the community around that river. In that process a document was created, it was adopted by consensus at the end of 2023, in December, and in March 2024 the Municipal Plenary of the City Council of Outes adopted it unanimously, and then it became the first City Council to adopt an institutional declaration recognizing the rights of a river and, let's say, it had a lot of impact. It serves a bit like a compass, a compass to guide political action, to also give a framework to the community itself to move towards those objectives, towards that river Tins that they imagined, right? And well, it has been useful in that sense.

What rights does this declaration establish?

Well, it has ten rights, beginning with flowing freely. Also, for example, and this is something that the older people emphasized a lot, to the conservation of their biocultural heritage, because in the past the people had a very close link with the river, because of the lavandeiras, the pesqueiras, the traditional mills. There is a whole intangible heritage that is also a right to be preserved, not to be polluted, to maintain its riparian forests, not to be invaded by invasive exotic species. Well, a whole series of rights that, at the same time, are the other side of the coin of the commitments that the declaration also establishes for the community, which are, let us say, what will guarantee that these rights are respected.

Is this a symbolic action or does it have any legal effects?

Well, for legal purposes, a declaration is what in English they call "soft law." Obviously it is not binding but, let's say, only in a certain way it is not binding, because many of the rights, for example, not to be polluted, there is already a whole regulatory framework that establishes that rivers cannot be polluted. From the Water Framework Directive of the European Union, to the legislation of Galicia. There is also a convention, the Aarhus Convention, which already recognizes these rights. So, in a certain sense, the declaration, although it is a soft law, that is, it is not binding, it is based on a legal corpus that is binding, and to which it also makes reference, so in that sense it is not so symbolic. And obviously it has an essential component, a political declaration, in the sense of establishing long-term political objectives to which the municipality has committed itself, also unanimously: the four parties, of different political colors voted in favor, and also the associative and community fabric itself, which is where the text came from and which gave it form by consensus.

Has the community living in this area participated in this process?

We are right now, because it is also something that is included in the declaration, working on the creation of a river participation corps, let's say, of a governance body, to be established in order to be able to continue this project in the long term. That's the next challenge we have in the project, and that's something we're working on

Has this initiative been replicated in other areas?

In the end, the case of Outes is a new experience. Yes, there have been many places that contacted us because they loved the idea, they wanted to do something similar, some city councils have already replicated the idea of making a similar declaration. So we believe that yes, it is going to have a future and that yes, it can inspire other places, not so that we can take the initiative, but so that they can adapt it, or use it as a basis to develop their own processes. In the end, this is a declaration of rights and commitments that comes out of a participatory process, and ideally in other places it should come out of something similar, so that it is not something empty, but anchored in what the people have really decided collectively.

Let's think about the systemic change you are talking about; why a claim for the rights of nature?

Well, first of all because we are in the 21st century, and just as 200 years ago people did not conceive of people as subjects of rights, so now, let's say, the context of

ecological and climate crisis means that we have to look at nature as the system that makes life on the planet possible, and also our own, obviously. It is at such a delicate point that it needs an advance, a qualitative leap from the way we were addressing it legislatively, which was obviously a very anthropocentric way. In this sense, there has been not only a theoretical debate, but also concrete experiences of how to put this into practice. In Spain, a very significant law was passed endowing, recognizing, the legal personality of the Mar Menor. It is a coastal system in the Mediterranean, also very biodiverse, also very affected by agribusiness, but also by historical mining and its long-term consequences, despite the fact that mining has not been operating for decades. Then, beyond the implications of an ecosystem having legal personality, being a subject of rights, for example, it makes possible the popular action in defense of that ecosystem. Then, any entity that meets a series of requirements can represent the ecosystem, to allow the ecosystem to defend itself before the courts. And this is something that our legal framework did not contemplate. So, faced with this critical situation, the law has to adapt and create new tools to achieve objectives such as (what for example the Spanish Constitution and those of other countries also recognize) the right to enjoy a healthy environment. This is extremely important. And if the current legal framework is not succeeding, as in fact it is, in achieving these objectives, new tools must be provided.

Why is it important to learn and teach how to defend these rights?

We have talked about the Symbiocene, there are different philosophical perspectives, but we have to understand that we humans are part of nature, of ecosystems, and we cannot dream of living with our backs totally turned to them. We do, actually, or we try to, but reality is quite stubborn, and it shows us from time to time that this is not possible, and that our extractivist paradigm of use and throw away, of thinking that the planet is infinite, and that we can extract as much as we want and dump as much waste as we want, and that this is not going to have any implications on the capacity of the planet to harbor and sustain life, especially our own, is a fantasy. I think this is becoming increasingly clearer, and that is why we have to move towards a model where this changes, not only in relation to issues such as the right of nature, but in general how we assume our possibilities to consume today, but also in relation to the rights of future generations, which is extremely important. Because of what we do today, many times, we do it at the expense and conditioning of the possibilities that tomorrow's generations will have.

Isn't it strange to have to demand that rights to natural resources be recognized?

Seen from our, no longer only anthropocentric, but, above all, a very ethnocentric paradigm, it seems that we are inventing something new with the "rights of nature." But, in the end, many of these ideas are based on attempts to understand the worldviews of indigenous peoples, where the rights of nature, with another way of expressing these concepts, already existed. And it is something that is not alien to many societies. So, perhaps it is not so much an innovation as a recovery of that balance, and of the way in which we have to understand our relationship with nature as a part of it. And just as many indigenous societies, in their cosmovisions, embraced similar principles, we must also begin to assume this need to rethink our relationship with ecosystems.

The declaration of rights enables a form of land and natural resource stewardship; do you recommend that other interested communities follow this model?

I think it is a very powerful tool. So, the first thing to do is to understand it as such. There is no set procedure for such. In the case of Outes, we had the advantage that the municipal government supported the initiative. So it was relatively easy that, when it reached the municipal level, it was approved unanimously. But it could be imagined, in another context, that this is an initiative, a declaration of rights, that comes exclusively from civil society, that the institutions do not want to support it, or are not in favor of taking such a measure. There are other experiences where it has happened this way, so I do not believe that there are any necessary preconditions beyond the will and that there is a dialogue between different agents, because in the end, if we think above all about rivers, this makes a lot of sense at the basin level. Because rivers are par excellence the ecosystem where, if you do something upstream, it will have consequences downstream. Therefore, it makes a lot of sense for the communities of a basin to establish a dialogue among themselves, to create, let us say, formulas for discussion, for governance, precisely to avoid the existence of these problems. And that is why it makes sense for an ecosystem such as a river to be equipped with these types of tools.

Was this declaration intended to promote a national law for the protection and restoration of nature?

In fact, in the Spanish case it was fortunate that the law recognizing the legal personality of the Mar Menor, due to legal competences, had to be adopted by the Congress of Deputies, it is a state law, despite the fact that it affects a specific ecosystem. It really opened the door so that there could be, in the future, more similar laws, or a general law that, in some way, recognizes rights to ecosystems in general. In fact, I believe that this is where we should be heading, and it has been many years since the Spanish Basic Framework Law on Biodiversity was updated, and perhaps a future revision of that law should already include this type of principle. It would make perfect sense.

How would you describe Spain's environmental health?

I see it as complicated because we are talking about laws, but really laws are useless if they are not complied with, and if there is no active environmental public demanding compliance. Many times different industries, and governments themselves, say: "Europe: we are the most advanced jurisdictions in the world in terms of environmental legislation." It may be questionable, but there is indeed advanced environmental legislation. But this legislation is useless if it is not applied. If governments, if due to corruption, or negligence, or other types of pressures, governments do not apply those rules, they are systematically not complied with, and if, on the other hand, they try to weaken the basis of the democratic rule of law, which is citizen participation and the rights of citizens to intervene in the matters that concern them, it is really dangerous, because we can slide towards more totalitarian drifts. And in the environmental field I think this is happening, because there is a stigmatization of people who denounce bad practices, destructive projects: the so-called Nimby syndrome (not in my back yard). And how people who denounce polluting spills, or who denounce corruption associated with environmental decisions, are suddenly backward people, they are Nimbies, there is an attempt, let's say, to eliminate their legitimacy, when they are really exercising the basic pillar of the democratic rule of law, which is active

citizenship, in this case environmental citizenship. And this is something that is being seen at the level of the European Union even when, for example, in mining it is said that the main obstacle is no longer economic but social accessibility. And when we try to undermine that environmental citizenship to facilitate social accessibility to resources, or other extractive activities, we create a very problematic situation, and that is one of the things that worries me most in terms of environmental health: how they are undermining the environmental rights of people and communities.

Does your Association dedicate time to education for the defense of the right to environmental justice and its reparation?

The foundation we have here, in Froxán, is called Montescola, which comes from mount and school, and you can sense that for us education is a key issue, and in fact, in everything that has to do with care, with understanding what the community territories are, we start from the fact that it is fundamental to bring in those who will be the community members of tomorrow. So that they understand the importance of community conservation, of communal governance. And this also includes, of course, the exercise of active environmental citizenship, and to know the tools that make this exercise possible and the rights behind it. So, for us it is fundamental and children, adolescents of different ages, and also university students are always coming here to learn about what is being done here, to show that it is possible to have another relationship with our land.

What is your relationship with the University [Academia]?

It is a complicated space, with a lot of pressure, but we are fortunate that in the universities there are good people who understand the three legs of teaching and research, but also service to society. And in recent years the concept of service-learning has been gaining strength, and that through the universities very interesting projects are being carried out in the field, and that also help us to contrast what we do in the territory, sometimes by intuition, or traditional knowledge, with the more theoretical, more academic contribution of different disciplines.

You have mentioned in this conversation the word “comunera”, can you explain what reality you are referring to when you use that word?

In the context of Galicia and of the mountain communities, a “comunera” is a person with an open house and “smoke.” Which normally translates to someone who lives in the place at least nine months a year. And this is important because the figure of the forest communities, which are made up of “comuneras,” is something that has nothing to do with the rights of being registered, with being legal or illegal, but simply the fact of being a neighbor, and necessarily the fact of being a neighbor and being part of a community, in the customary sense, is what gives the right to participate in the management of that land. Furthermore, it is a territory that, unlike private property, cannot be sold, cannot be divided, cannot be inherited. So, if a person, even if he has his house here, if he does not live here, he ceases to be a member of the community. In a certain sense, as it was in the past, it has a certain egalitarian component and access to this management for the people who are really part of the community, regardless of their status or position. And this is also very important for future generations to be interested and, in the future, to want to participate and be active participants in the governance of their territories.

Joam, what fuels your energy to continue fighting in an environment where capitalist extractivism predominates and a certain hostility on the part of some sectors of society towards environmentalism is present?

Well, we really have no alternative. Because if we don't do what we are doing, every summer, like the one that is starting now, the nights that we have wind from the northeast we would be restless thinking, "will it be tonight that there is a fire, that fire comes to our houses, that we have to get up in the middle of the night to try to put it out? will it be today?" So, what we're doing is what allows us to live in safety, to protect our community, to protect our community water supply, and also to live in a landscape that is dignified, and that we can identify with. And that is something very different from the alternative, which is either abandonment, which is not an idyllic rewilding, because, when we are talking about invasive species, here the result would be that in a matter of decades this would be completely full of, as it is in some places, unfortunately, of acacias, of eucalyptus, in a situation already of very complicated reversion. Or it would be to hand over our territories, as other communities do, to companies such as Ence to be managed for 30 years and, let us say, there the link with the territory is completely broken and the integrity, safety and life of the people is compromised. From our point of view this is what we have to do, there is no alternative. Either that, or leave, and that is not the way we are going to go. So that has to be the way.

From the Constellation of the Commons (CC) we are working on the production of a useful and proactive imaginary that encourages civic participation in the transformation of the hegemonic system. Can you share with us some good news?

Well, the news is that in Froxán, in seven years, we have recovered more than 40 hectares of native forest. That we are managing to involve more and more people, that we are attracting funding. This also shows that it is something that is beginning to be supported and that, for example, the number of brigadistas is increasing. We are now over 1,400 people, when we started with 50, and the number of communities that are participating is also increasing. In fact, in the last few months we have been in six communities in our area that had never participated in any type of action of this type before. And that motivates us a lot to continue and continue, and grow and grow.

