



BOOK REVIEW

Urban Forests in Latin America: Uses, Functions, Representations. 2006. S. Nail, Ed., Universidad Externado de Colombia. 345 pp. ISBN 958-710-126-X.

Over the past few decades, the concern of scientists and environmental campaigners regarding the forests of Latin America has focused largely on the rainforests and their indigenous peoples. By contrast, very little attention has been given to that continent's urban forests. However, some 75% of Latin Americans now live in cities and the United Nations has estimated this figure will rise to 85% by the year 2030.

In Latin America, the concept of urban forestry has only recently received some recognition. Research on the natural environment in urban areas has previously focused more on urban agriculture, land use and ecology rather than issues of urban and peri-urban forestry as such. This pioneering book hopes to stimulate a much greater awareness and concern for the urban forests of Latin America by highlighting their very significant environmental, economic, social and cultural values.

In this collection of case studies on Latin American urban forests, six countries are represented: Columbia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Brazil. Using the varied theoretical tools inherent in the contributors' disciplines (such as geography, anthropology and agronomy), the chapters explore critically the practices, functions and representations of urban trees and woodlands in Latin America.

As in Europe and North America, Latin American urban forests are characterized by their multiple benefits, as Antonia Bracq Egg shows in the case of Iquitos. The perception of these urban forests as recreational spaces has increased, as Moralba Maldonado's contribution on Caracas clearly shows. On occasions these spaces can become fiercely disputed, as Francine Barthe-Deloizy and Angelo Serpa show in Salvador de Bahia. At the other extreme, urban woodlands sometime

act as agents of democratization through local participation; as with the experience described by Dolly Cristina Palacio in Bogata. They can provide places where the demands for recognition of a specific sector of the population can become a reality, as Eduardo Parry and Gemma Rojas demonstrate in Santiago.

In Latin America, urban forest landscapes are frequently the result of superimposing European aesthetic criteria on native landscapes and cultures, as a consequence of colonization. Claudia Petry gives a vivid demonstration of this phenomenon in southern Brazil. Urban areas often reflect not only the human domination of nature, but also one human being's control over another, thus creating socio-spatial hierarchies. Elma Montana's contribution on Mendoza provides a stark and moving example of this.

As in many parts of the world, urban forests in Latin American continue to be sacrificed to rapid, uncontrolled and sometimes anarchical urban development. The destruction of the trees frequently leads to the depletion of other vital natural resources, such as water. Jair Preciado Beltran's contribution describes this process in Bogata, and shows that the political will to implement public policies aimed at limiting the destruction of natural resources often comes too late, or worse, is non-existent.

As the editor and catalyst for this book, Sylvie Nail is to be congratulated on bringing together a remarkable collection of valuable contributions to urban forestry literature. It is hoped the work will significantly raise the political profile of urban forests in Latin America, leading to a substantially increased investment in their protection and expansion. It is highly recommended reading for all those involved with trees and the urban environment and who care sincerely about the need to improve the quality of life for all urban dwellers.

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