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CHILE

Survival of ancient tree hinges on political will

BY JIMMY LANGMAN

Special to The Herald

PUERTO MONTT, Chile - At his modest office in this southern city, Provincial Judge Manuel Perez Sanchez looks over his large desk and quickly gets to the point.

'All of Chile's institutions are negligent in protecting the alerce. It is tragic,' he says.

Judge Perez Sanchez's criticism is so angry and sharp-edged because he and many others here are concerned that the country is leaving severely unprotected one of nature's greatest and rarest treasures -- the alerce tree.

The species can live up to 4,000 years, making it the world's second-oldest tree after California's bristlecone pine. Similar in appearance to the giant sequoia of California, some alerces grow 150 feet high and 15 feet in diameter.

But the tree's durable, reddish wood is prized by builders and furniture makers, and it was on its way to being logged and burned into oblivion until Chile's government in 1976 declared it a national monument and prohibited the cutting of any live alerces.

The international scientific community also moved to save it by banning the international trade of alerce wood and listing the tree as protected under the U.N. Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

But the 70-year-old Perez Sanchez says a combination of legal loopholes, lack of political will and weak enforcement are allowing widespread illegal logging of Chile's alerces to flourish. And he says he feels powerless to stop it.

'Chile's forest protection law is really a forest un-protection law,' Perez Sanchez says.

FINES GO UNPAID

In June, the judge levied his biggest fine yet, \$2 million, against a dozen people responsible for illegally logging alerces on nearly 100,000 acres of forest in the nearby rural community of Fresia. Puerto Montt is 620 miles south of the Chilean capital of Santiago.

In his 10 years as a judge, Perez Sanchez says he has deliberated on about 300 cases of illegal alerce logging, handing down convictions in 95 percent of the cases.

But to this day, he says, few of the guilty parties have paid their fines because the local municipal governments don't care to follow up.

He also says the national government inexplicably shut down recently the ecological crimes division of the Chilean police. And he complains the jail time for the illegal logging of alerces is just 15 nights and the convicts are allowed to roam free during the daytime.

In May, Rosa Munoz, a judge in nearby Los Muermos, ordered the arrest of the executive director of Chile's forest service, known as Conaf, for questioning on whether a powerful local senator may have unethically pressured the agency to allow his constituents to cut the tree.

The Conaf director, Carlos Weber, who was released three days later, issued a bevy of public denials. But his arrest stoked intense Chilean media attention and invigorated a debate over the government's failure to protect the alerce.

Munoz, however, withdrew from the case in late May after receiving anonymous death threats. A new judge, Hernan Crisosto Greisse, has suspended all existing Conaf-approved management plans involving alerces, and in June detained the Conaf director for questioning.

`IT'S NOT THAT MUCH'

Weber claims the issue is overblown. 'The illegal cutting of alerce, in the worst year, we estimate involves about 3,000 individual trees. Compared to the number of alerces that die by natural causes each year, it's not that much,' Weber said.

But conservationists say that alerces exist to varying degrees on only about 640,000 acres of mostly remote, mountainous areas in southern Chile and some adjacent parts of western Argentina, about 83 percent of which is unprotected on privately held land. About half the original alerce forests have been wiped out.

The alerces have been utilized for years in Chilean construction for siding, shingles, doors and flooring. The wood also is found in a variety of furniture, handicrafts, musical instruments and even pencils.

On Chile's black market, wood from alerces can fetch about \$60 per board foot. In the United States, Canada or Japan, alerce is said to bring in \$500 per board foot.

JUST 12 ENGINEERS

Though dead alerces can be cut under approved management plans, environmental groups charge that loggers falsely claim the trees are dead, burn them to make it seem they've died naturally or just cut the trees without Conaf's knowledge.

Rene Reyes, a Chilean forest scientist, complains that in the southern lakes region, Conaf has ``just 12 forest engineers to enforce forest laws covering more than 9.4 million acres of native forest.'

Chile's lower house of congress has formed a special committee to investigate the alleged 'irregularities' involving Conaf and illegal trafficking in alerce timber.

But environmentalists say the high-profile scandal surrounding illegal trade in alerce is symptomatic of a larger lack of commitment by the Ricardo Lagos government to improve native forest protection.

'Alerces are ancient, as old as the pyramids. But the will of the government to protect even these icons of the forests is shockingly absent,' says Malu Sierra, director of the group Defenders of the Chilean Forest.