

ENVIRONMENT

Replacement of Aerial Skidders by Caterpillar Tractors Proves Disastrous to Ecology of the Caucasus

Thirty years ago the mountainside felling areas of the Krasnodar Krai were covered by a dense network of simple mechanisms. Along steel cables stretched between masts and augmented by a system of blocks and tackles connected to a winch, timber from felling sectors 800 to 1000 metres distant was hauled aerially through passes, canyons and river valleys to the upper landings. These simple mechanisms, which were called aerial skidders, hauled up to 800,000 cubic metres of timber annually from otherwise inaccessible sites without doing damage to the environment. Such inexpensive machinery was greatly prized. Its assembly and operation was entrusted to specially trained teams of workmen and engineers. The expertise of the skilled craftsmen of the day was renowned throughout the country.

But then, along came the heavy TT-4 caterpillar tractor. Powerful, manoeuvrable and controlled by a single operator, it quickly squeezed out its rival skidder, the maintenance of which required professionals with engineering skills. The more so since with lower expenditures there was a sharp increase in output per shift. Moreover, the fellers snipped off some "tasty morsels" - felling sections on gentle slopes, in upland valleys, on river banks and close to roads. The forest in those days was like a circular wall and few people suspected that its reserves were anything but limitless. As for the ecology, not a word was breathed about that.