

## The Smell of Winter

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Misiones is worldwide known for Iguazú Falls, its intense, green, dense forests and red, fertile soil. Oberá is the second most important city in the province. It is located in the south centre of the province, in the middle of the Green Corridor of *Sierras Centrales*, a hill range which spans from south to north. Oberá has a warm average temperature the year round, 20°C. However, there are few periods in wintertime when it is very cold. It is at that time of the year when the rich scent of burnt wood can be smelt in the streets. If you raise your eyes you can see light grey smoke coming out of the chimneys of every house in the city. In each household there is, at least, one kind of biomass heating, i.e. a cast iron stove, a salamander stove or a hearth; or two, or all of them.

What is the local meaning of domestic fire? A fireplace is the heart of a home. At night, families gather round fireplaces to get warm, and spend their idle time, hearing the crackling of wood and watching flames dance. They usually have supper, talk, watch TV, read the papers, or do some hand work. At daytime, women also cook on the cast iron wood stove when the fire is lit so that energy is not wasted. Sometimes, they light a fire even if it is not very cold to remove indoor moisture, or to dry laundry on rainy days. As can be seen, fireplaces have emotional and pragmatic meanings for these people.



Oberá has a population of around 40,000 residents. Although electric power is affordable in the city, people prefer biomass heating systems, namely woodfire, over electric heating ones. A logical explanation may be that the city founders were European emigrants from cold countries, such as Sweden, Poland, Germany, and Ukraine, among others. They started coming in large immigration waves in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oberá was formally established on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1928. Apparently, these people brought this technology with them and its use has been spread widely ever since. Probably, they kept this custom because they established their home in neighboring farms where firewood was the only fuel available for cooking and heating at the time. Yet, after gas and electricity became plentifully available in the region, their descendants, who moved into the city, have continued with the tradition of heating their households with firewood. Natives of the land "*los criollos*" have also adopted this practice as a consequence of sharing social life, such as school, church and workplace. As a result, there is a fire going on in every household in winter. However, as citizens are becoming more environmentally aware, there is a concern whether this vast, long lasting use of firewood in Oberá will end by destroying our adjacent forests.

Oberá is also called, "*La Capital del Monte*" for its copious forests. It means that there is plenty of fuel to burn. An average city family consumes about 2.5 m<sup>3</sup> of firewood per season. Nevertheless, most of these city dwellers buy their firewood from adjoining farms called "*chacras*". Their owners have cleared up the land for implanted forestry, agriculture or livestock. Then, they sell the wood, which has been chopped as firewood. They usually have a truck and deliver the goods to the customers' door. There are some sellers who are willing to stack the firewood in the backyard shed or the garage, which are the places where firewood is usually kept in store. There are also loggers who offer firewood by the main access roads to the city; so people drive to those places and buy

the product on the spot. They have the trunk of their cars loaded with firewood and bring it home. Prices differ according to the services offered. Occasionally, an inconvenience may arise. The wood could be not dry enough to be used immediately. If that is the case, when people attempt to light a fire, a lot of unpleasant smoke is released and its combustion becomes inefficient. Thus, it is wise to buy firewood in summer and store it for winter, instead of buying it when the demand is greater.



What environmental consequences can the local massive use of domestic firewood bring about? Will our forests be destroyed? Most unlikely. Studies in developing countries around the world have concluded that domestic use of firewood does not cause deforestation.

In contrast, the use of firewood for business, such as tea and yerba mate drying processes; and reforestation for industrial use, for instance, paper and furniture manufacturing, result in deforestation which, in turn, accounts for loss of water, soil erosion and environmental degradation.



Summing up, domestic use of firewood in Oberá is harmless to the environment, i.e. it does not lead to deforestation. A fire at home results in multiple emotional and practical benefits for the dwellers. It makes home cozy, brings family together, save fossil fuel energy, remove indoor moisture, and keeps tradition alive.-