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## Papua New Guinea: Woodlark's islanders demand a halt to oil palm plantations

The 85,000 hectares territory of Woodlark Island in Papua New Guinea's Milne Bay Province is almost totally covered by dense lowland rainforest -- lowland dry forest on the eastern side and dense jungle on the western side --which is home to several endemic species. Woodlark Island holds unique ebony species which include dark/black, grey and grey/black varieties, - there are no other forests of this type in the world.

Most of the 6,000 island's inhabitants depend on the available natural environment as well as the marine resources, doing gardening --they mainly plant yams, taro, sweet potatoes, and bananas- as well as fishing and hunting --that play a smaller, though important, role in their diet.

Now the island faces the threat of being swallowed by a proposed 60,000 hectare oil palm estate, which is part of a project by the Malaysian-based company Vitroplant Ltd. The project also includes the building of an oil palm methyl ester plant in the province's capital city of Alotau. Woodlark will feed the plant with the palm oil beans grown in the extensive monoculture oil palm plantations to be converted into biodiesel for domestic consumption and export.

The oil palm plantation establishment will be situated on approximately 60,000 ha. Most of the project would be developed on governmental land and the rest as village oil palm, i.e. oil palm on customary land.

The company has submitted an application for an Environmental Permit which is still pending of awarding. According to the application, they have stated that all necessary requirements had been fulfilled, including consultation with the landowners.

However, George Laume, from CELCOR INC. Friends of the Earth-PNG, received reports from concerned people from the island regarding the major palm oil project and recently he gathered that there is still lack of consultation and communities are opposing this development.

Last month's Jeremy Hance report (1) said that "according to the islanders, they were never consulted regarding the plans until after the government had already granted the lease to Vitroplant Ltd." Dr. Simon Piyuwes is an island born medical doctor who has become an advocator of the struggle against the oil palm plantation. Hance quotes Piyuwes's "several reasons why Vitroplant Ltd.'s plans are unacceptable to the islanders. He states that the logging would destroy the island's endemic ebony, cause extinctions of rare species, and threaten marine life by waste from the project. Not only does he foresee environmental disaster, but also disintegration of the native culture, stating that the company's plans would bring 'socially unacceptable behavior on the island'. And that all the islanders would eventually be threatened with 'starvation' since 'there will be no space for gardening and hunting'. Dr. Piyuwes admits that while there may be some economic and infrastructure benefits to the island, he believes the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages."

A project heralded by its promoters as crucial to the island's development, is perceived by many as a

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threat for Papua New Guinea. Recently, more than one hundred islanders and supporters traveled to the Milne Bay provincial government headquarters in Alotau, to demand a halt to the palm oil project and claim their land back.

They know that the Vitroplant project --that implies logging-- will cause the waters to become turbid. This, in turn, will imply the death of coral reefs fringing the Island for lack of sunlight. The reefs and fishing grounds, fishery nurseries (mangroves) as well as food producing areas for the island will be affected. Hunting and foods gathered from the bush will be lost. The people of Woodlark Island will become dependent on imported, processed food for their sustenance and will be forced to work on oil palm plantations to survive.

Oil Palm is labor intensive and the current population of approximately 6000 will not be able to bear the load of an oil palm plantation of this scale. A work force will need to be imported on to the Island to meet the demand of labor further exacerbating social and environmental pressures.

It has been suggested in the environmental plan that this will bring employment to other Papua New Guineans. Papua New Guinea is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world with more than 850 different spoken languages. This means there are many cultural differences within relatively small distances. An introduction of outside groups will place immense pressure on the local population.

Growing from the grassroots, a halt to oil palm plantations may change the course of the country. Building on the awareness, determination, and drive of Woodlark's islanders, that change could be realised.

Article based on information provided by George Laume, CELCOR INC. FoE-PNG, e-mail: [glaume@celcor.org.pg](mailto:glaume@celcor.org.pg), [www.celcor.org.pg](http://www.celcor.org.pg), and (1) Biofuels versus Native Rights: Planned logging of Woodlark Island for biofuels opposed by islanders and scientists, Jeremy Hance, special to [mongabay.com](http://news.mongabay.com). November 12, 2007, [http://news.mongabay.com/2007/1112-hance\\_woodlark.html](http://news.mongabay.com/2007/1112-hance_woodlark.html)