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## Aotearoa / New Zealand: Changing Ownership and Management of State Owned Plantations

Last year I attended a conference in Capetown on the above subject, where the push appeared to be for the involvement of the Private Sector in the ownership and management of Plantations. As an Indigenous person from a country with huge areas of monocultural exotic plantations, I had never thought much about the ownership of these plantations. In my country they had a history of state ownership, although recent times had seen the sale of some of these plantations. Ethically, I am opposed to the privatization of state assets by any government and regard it as a false economic measure. However, I am also opposed to the proliferation of large scale, monocultural tree farms and had been encouraged by a recent shift in government attitudes in this country where more emphasis (in terms of new plantings) had appeared to be focused on Indigenous species and erosion control in particular. True, I had not thought it went far enough and was frustrated by the relatively small areas of Indigenous plantings, but I believed that it was a significant shift in attitude that was appearing to place much greater emphasis on Conservation. So, would it be so bad if the private sector took over ownership and management of these large plantations?

It would provide the Government with a cash injection for social reforms and would rid it of the necessity of running unpopular forestry programmes. At least this appeared to be a major thread of the argument running through the Capetown conference and there is a lot of truth in that philosophy, but years of experience in the political arena had taught me that there must be a downside to the argument. I remembered the words of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development at their forum on the Clean Development Mechanism during the World Summit on Sustainable Development. "If there isn't a business case to be put forward, then it is charity". The clear message of this statement (and these were concerned, caring businesses regarded as the good guys) was that businesses were not in the habit of handing out charity. So what does this mean for the issue of Governments selling plantations? Well, if they are only going to be cut down and not used as an ongoing source of supply, I am not sure that I really give a damn. They are after all invasive species and a relic of colonization. However, from a business and investment point of view, it would appear to be not economic to cut them and walk away. At least not if they got them at a fair price; and if they did not, then that says a lot about the business sense of the selling government.

Therefore, we need to consider the long term implications of ownership of these plantations by people with a demonstrated history of cutting labour, toxic chemical use, clear cutting with heavy machinery and investment in Genetic Modification research. Why do we need to consider this? Because "If there isn't a business case to be put forward, then it's charity". The above measures increase the profit margin, and that is the business case, the profit margin. When governments run these plantation areas, they are obliged to consider the social cost of the measures they use because if they prove too unpopular, the government may find itself on the unemployment line after the next election. In most of our countries, we have the option of ridding ourselves of governments that have made too many unpopular decisions. We don't however, elect the Boards of the companies that would manage plantations under privatization and that are the worry. They do not have the same restrictions on their profit margins as governments may have. In the meantime of course, if they were sold, the government could wring its hands and say how terrible they thought the company was, but

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how free enterprise must be allowed to flourish, regardless of a few flaws. That's my problem with the sale of these monolithic tree farms. Someone else makes the profit, we still pay the price, except it has grown somewhat and no-one gets to be held accountable for the social impacts.

If the privatization of plantations in your country is an issue, then think about the whys and the what ifs before you just pass it off as not something you care about because it is only plantations and you don't like them anyway.

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