
Papua New Guinea: Small-scale sawmilling a good way forward

The richness of PNG's forests is well known, and so is their level of destruction due to industrial logging. This unsustainable activity --in most cases related to high levels of corruption-- has provided large revenues to corporations while at the same time has left local communities without their sources of livelihoods.

Local Non Governmental Organizations --organized under the Papua New Guinea Eco Forestry Forum-- together with local land owners are pushing forward another model of forest management (see WRM Bulletin 44).

Eco-forestry, can include different activities inside the forest, such as fruit and butterfly collection, rattan and medicinal plant harvesting, scientific research and eco-tourism, together with small-scale logging, linked to community based small-scale sawmilling.

This latter activity is based on the use of small-scale portable sawmills which are relatively simple and affordable to local communities. They can be carried into the forest and used to mill timber at the specific site where the tree has been felled. Small-scale saw milling has many benefits, among which the following:

- The type of technology used is appropriate to the rural community situation;
- The operation brings training and new skills to local people;
- The business provides local employment and wages;
- Sawn timber can be sold or used in other development projects;
- The operation of the sawmill builds esteem and local capacity; and
- The level of harvesting does not threaten the forest ecosystem.

Local NGOs --among which the Pacific Heritage Foundation-- provide support and training to the local people. Local communities are required to become a legal entity, to have a land use plan, and people must be trained on how to fell the trees and operate the sawmill. At the same time, NGOs are also putting pressure on the Government to encourage and promote eco-forestry rather than industrial logging ventures.

Although the sawmills are mostly operated by men, women play an important role in the administrative part of the business. Additionally, this community-based approach not only consists in the extraction of timber but also in the collection of a wide range of non timber forests products and women here play a major role.

All these activities generate financial benefits to the locals. In some cases, monetary incomes are

equal to the ones that they used to earn when allowing companies to log their lands. But even when those incomes may be less at an individual level, the community as a whole shares the full range of monetary and non-monetary benefits. Equally importantly, in all cases these activities guarantee community participation and control over their forest and long term sustainability of forest resources.

Article based on: Interview to Vassiti Mauta, from the Pacific Heritage Foundation in October 2002 ;
Information from the Papua New Guinea Eco-Forestry Forum's web site,
<http://www.ecoforestry.org.pg/>