
Samoa: Eucalyptus vaccine for logging virus?

The Pacific Ocean country of Samoa includes the islands of Savai'i, Upolu, Apolima and Manono, the two former being the largest and more populated. As in many other countries, forests are declining and according to a study carried out by Groome and Poury in 1995, approximately one-third (23,885 hectares) of the country's forests were cleared between 1977 and 1990. The forest clearance rate during that period of 3% per annum was one of the highest in the world. While the clearance rate for Upolu stood at 50 hectares per year, for Savai'i it was estimated at an unsustainable of 1,000 hectares per annum.

According to the Assistant Director of Forestry, Afamasaga Sami Lemalu "merchantable forests will be logged out if the current rate of forestation continues," adding that "there is a need to stem such a crisis and introduce policies to ensure we have forestry reserves for the future."

As is happening elsewhere, there are different approaches to forests in different government departments. While the Environment Department calls for the conservation of the natural environment, the Forestry Department does not advocate a halt to the logging industry and works under the premise that "forestry is a renewable resource and we believe it should be exploited to generate important revenue to our economy. Provided that the forests are sustainably utilized."

From the Forestry Department's viewpoint, there are "far too many" saw mills in Savai'i and the manner in which the trees are being logged leaves much to be desired. "The logging machines used in Savai'i do not utilize the full marketing potential of the trees. There is far too much log wasted." Four logging companies are operating in Savai'i: Bluebird Lumber at A'opo and Gataivai, Strickland Brothers at Taga, TVC at Letui and Savai'i Saw Miller in Pu'apu'a. The villages receive a meagre 22 cents per cubic foot in royalty payments from the logging companies, while a third of the royalties are paid to the government in forestry fees.

The Forestry Department is pushing to legislate a reforestation levy on logging companies. At the moment, says Afamasaga, "the companies are just cutting down trees without assisting in replanting the barren land it leaves behind. The saw millers should also contribute to the Forestry Department in its efforts to replant the depleted trees." However --as also happens elsewhere-- the Forestry Division seems to confuse trees with forests and has introduced other exotic tree species like mahogany and eucalyptus to compensate the loss of native trees. In spite of the fact that there is a high demand for native wood like ifilele (*Intsia bijuga*) and tava (*Pometia pinnata*) and in spite of the fact that ifilele is listed by the Environment Department as an endangered flora species, all would seem to be well if this species were to be substituted by eucalyptus or mahogany, because there would still be "forest cover."

However, it needs to be stressed that probably the most threatened timber tree in Samoa is ifilele, a highly valued hardwood traditionally carved into wooden handicrafts such as tanoa (kava bowls) and walking sticks. The tree is used for similar purposes in Fiji (called vesi) and in Tonga (fehi). Ifilele is considered to have the finest wood in Samoa because of its hardness, rich golden brown grain, and high durability. It is clearly absurd to pretend that this type of tree can be "compensated" by planting

alien species and even more absurd to promote the substitution of Samoa's diverse forests with monoculture tree plantations. Not all "forest covers" are equal and tree monocultures are definitely not forests.