
Papua New Guinea: Two opposite approaches to forest use

The state of Papua New Guinea (PNG) comprises the eastern part of the island of New Guinea and a series of smaller islands in the Bismarck Sea and the Coral Sea in the Pacific region. It holds one of the largest intact wilderness areas on Earth. Both natural and cultural diversity used to thrive in that country. The wide variety of microclimates and landforms existing in its more than 462,840 square kilometres have made it possible for several forest types ranging, from lowland mixed forests to mangroves along the coast. Accordingly, PNG's forests provide the habitat for about 200 species of mammals, 20,000 species of plants, 1,500 species of trees and 750 species of birds, half of which are endemic to the island. It has been estimated that between 5 and 7% of the known species in the world live in PNG. Rare plants and animals like the largest orchid, the largest butterfly, the longest lizard, the largest pigeon and the smallest parrot ever registered live in these forests. Additionally, more than 700 languages are spoken by the nations that form a population of 4,200,000 inhabitants.

This unique natural and cultural heritage is in danger. The PNG Eco-Forestry Forum has denounced that between 1975 and 1996, PNG lost more than 10% of its forests because of large scale logging. Corrupt and unscrupulous foreign logging companies are directly responsible for such destruction. Even the Prime Minister of PNG has admitted that "governance has been particularly poor in the area of forestry, with the side effect of promoting corrupt practices and undermining environmental sustainability in logging activities". Nowadays, almost half of the country's accessible forests are already committed to industrial logging, and over 30 proposed timber projects threaten the rest.

In 1999, the initiative of the PNG government to slow down the alarming rate of rainforest loss, including a ban on new logging projects and promises to support community-based forestry and conservation programmes, provoked enthusiasm among environmentalists and local communities. The official move was mostly due to the requirement formulated by the World Bank of a moratorium on new logging concessions until a full review was carried out, as a condition to obtain a structural adjustment loan. In spite of that, the World Bank is currently preparing to make the final disbursement of the loan even though the review is not complete. It is feared that once it receives that money, the PNG government, eager to obtain cash from exports, will ignore the ban and promote the final destruction of the country's forests.

PNG and international environmental NGOs have launched an international campaign for the protection of PNG's forests and biodiversity, and for the promotion of an ecoforestry approach. This alternative conservation model encompasses a variety of activities for the sustainable use of forest resources in the hands of local communities. Activities like fruit and butterfly collection, rattan and medicinal plant harvesting, scientific research and eco-tourism, together with small-scale logging are included. The beneficiaries would not be transnational logging companies but local people and conservation would be part of the production system. The PNG government now has to decide what to support: local people and the environment or transnational loggers and destruction.

