
Papua New Guinea: Social and environmental destruction by logging

What follows are extracts from the findings of an environmental and social impact assessment of logging operations in the west coast of Manus province, carried out in 1997 and during January 2000, which details the impacts of logging.

Logging has had a severe impact on food and other resources which form the basis of the livelihood of many forest dependent people. In terms of food resources, wild meat and fish represent vital sources of protein. Local communities state that the availability of wild meat has declined in the logging areas due to wild animals migrating towards the eastern part of Manus island. Fish, another vital source of protein, have also been severely affected by logging. The large quantities of soil sediments washed away from the areas into streams and rivers causes high turbidity level and siltation, which, combined with run-off of diesel oil used by logging machinery and chemicals employed to treat the timber, are causing dramatic declines in fish stocks. There have also been numerous instances where the logging company has bulldozed fruit and vegetable gardens located in or on the edge of the forest and destroying wild fruits and other edible forest plants.

The loss of food and the pollution of water sources leads to health problem amongst the forest dependent-communities, with women and children tending to suffer the most. The health clinic records have shown increased malnutrition due to the decline in wild meat and fish harvesting.

Community values are being undermined and the fabric and integrity of forest communities disrupted by extractive logging and by the subsequent reliance on the cash economy for essential daily products such as food. Social tensions within and between communities are often exacerbated as a result.

The social division caused by the arrival of large-scale logging is one of the major negative impacts identified by the landowners throughout the west coast of Manus area. Logging has created a new distinction at the community level between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' based on the sudden influx of cash from royalties. Because of the complex land tenure structures in Melanesia, and the need for logging companies to identify "landowners" in order to obtain national government licences to log, negotiations are often based on expediency and restricted to a few key individuals rather than taking place with all legitimate landowners. In this way, a few individuals can undermine the whole structure of customary land tenure in return for cash. Communities rarely see the promised infrastructure developments such as schools, clinics and permanent roads, other than logging roads.

As younger community members seek jobs in the logging camps, the drain of labour not only deprives the communities of needed hands in agriculture, hunting, fishing and cultural activities, but also contributes to other negative sides of the extractive industry, namely alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution.

Due to insufficient safety standards, lack of training, long working hours and pressure, the accident rate has been high. A number of high risk accidents have occurred, taken lives of chainsaw operators and other workers. The company has failed to provide insurance cover to those who work tirelessly

with the company on very low salaries.

Women seem to have been the worst affected. As many men go to find employment in the logging industry, a newly-emerging division of labour requires the women who remain to cope with previously male tasks and to work harder and longer hours to collect water and forest products, both of which are scarce because of logging operations.

The author of the study concludes that logging operations "are causing irreversible damage to the forest resources, including flora and fauna, and watershed integrity and soil quality. No benefits are reaching the customary landowners who depend on the forest resource. Logging has destroyed their means of subsistence and livelihood. ... (The) timber industry has made life harder for landowners in Papua New Guinea. The landowners face destruction of their environment and also of their society. Thus the future for the next generation is uncertain ...".

Article based on information from: Cain Lomai Pwesei.- "Environmental and Social Impact Assessment of Logging Operations in the West Coast of Manus Area, Manus Province, Papua New Guinea", January 2001.