
Solomon Islands: A sustainable alternative to unsustainable logging

The Solomon Islands have been devastated by Australian and Asian logging companies; which have swept through the country's forests, leaving a trail of disintegrating communities, flattened and degraded forests and silted coral reefs from runoff of exposed fragile soils.

Log extraction during 1998 was considered to be more than twice the sustainable rate. This is not a large resource base; and the positive economic impacts this has bought to the government's accounts will be short-lived; but the excessive rate of cutting is seriously undermining long-term sustainability of the resource base and future development prospects for the country. There is an urgent need to scale down and eventually eliminate industrial logging of natural forests and emphasize community-based, certified eco-timber production.

However, the Solomon Island government is shockingly unsupportive of forest sector reform. The new Solomon Island government that took power in June 2000 deferred the New Forests Act, which was aimed at setting the framework for a more sustainable, community based forestry sector. The new Act was intended 1) to ensure proper management of forest resources in an efficient, effective and ecologically sustainable manner; 2) to promote the development of a sustainable commercial timber industry so as to ensure maximum benefit to present and future generations; and 3) to protect and conserve forest resources, habitats, and ecosystems including the maintenance of ecological processes and genetic diversity.

In spite of the government's lack of support to socially equitable and environmentally sustainable forest management, the Solomon Islands Eco-forestry Project brings a ray of hope for the future. The project is a joint initiative of Greenpeace, the Solomon Islands Development Trust, the Foundation for the People of the South Pacific and the New Zealand Imported Tropical Timber Group.

The project empowers the local communities by helping them manage, maintain and market their own natural resources in sustainable ways while protecting their own environment and culture. Through the project, Solomon Islands village communities have been working for several years towards finding an income generating project that conserves their forests and marine resources. Since 1995 the programme has been helping village communities to organize themselves, manage their forests sustainably, and then mill and market a product they can now call eco-timber.

The Marovo Lagoon area in Solomon Islands' Western Province, was chosen to implement the project because of threats from logging, mining and forest clearance for a palm oil plantation in what is one of the Earth's natural wonders and a proposed World Heritage Area.

Greenpeace funded a study by a resource economist, comparing the economic costs and benefits of industrial logging to those of a small scale development. The report found that the cash value to local communities of small scale options, such as eco-forestry, fishing, tourism, carving and other crafts, food and building materials, was at least three times more than the destructive industrial options. Small scale options give landowners more direct control of their resources, distribute benefits more fairly and do not expose them to the high risk of fluctuations in international commodity markets. The

report recommended no logging or palm oil plantations should be permitted in the Marovo area.

The villages in the area are now marketing and exporting eco-timber to New Zealand and this month they sent their first shipment of timber to Australia. "This shipment is an amazing success for the village eco-timber producers and for the programme, especially given the civil war in the Solomon Islands over the last year and half," said Greenpeace forests campaigner, Grant Rosoman. In a country torn by conflict, with nearly 100 people dead and the economy in tatters, the Solomon Islands eco-timber industry emerges as a much needed enterprise to help regain social and economic stability. And can also prove to be a much needed example for many countries currently depleting their forests for the profit of a few.

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