
Malaysia: Campaign against plantation and pulp mill project in Sabah

A plantation project that would occupy about 3% of the area of Sabah, in northern Borneo, and provoke the clearcutting of 6% of its dwindling primary forests is being promoted in Kalabakan by a joint-venture between the State-owned company Innoprise Corporation Sdn Bhd, Lions Group of Malaysia and the China Fuxing Pulp and Paper Industries of China. The plantation and pulp and paper mill megaproject, whose cost has been evaluated in U\$S 1.1 billion, will require the felling of 240,000 hectares of forest to be replaced by a massive monoculture plantation of black wattle trees (*Acacia mangium*) --also known as dry acacia or mangium tree-- a fast growing tree native to Australia.

The project has sparked criticism because of its expected impacts and for not having even adhered to the weak legal environmental requirements existing in Sabah. According to the Sabah Conservation of Environment Prescribed Activities, any forest which is cleared for the felling of timber covering an area of 500 hectares or more or any development of forest plantation of 500 hectares or more requires an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Nevertheless 12,000 hectares of the land of the proposed project have already been logged without a single EIA done. Innoprise Corporation has claimed that no EIA is required since the logging operation was approved before the State EIA requirement was enforced, and announced the logging of another 33,000 hectares. The company completely ignores the Federal Government's Environment Quality Act of 1974 and the Environmental Quality Order of 1987 which oblige to perform EIA for these kind of activities. Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) --Friends of the Earth Malaysia-- has denounced that by allowing the logging to proceed without an EIA, the Sabah Government is completely disregarding the environmental impacts of the logging activities and is manipulating the law in favour of the interests of big companies and to the detriment of forest conservation.

It is reasonably feared that this huge plantation will provoke deleterious impacts on the environment. The plantation area will cut the biggest remaining block of continuous forest in the region which extends between the Danum Valley and the Maliau Basin, both classified as Class One Protection Areas. The area contains high biodiversity levels, including 120 mammal, 280 bird, and more than 2500 tree species. This biodiversity rich ecosystem is in danger of being substituted by a uniform and biodiversity poor agrosystem. Already wild animals are reported to have been sighted more often, probably fleeing from the logged area. Since the land of the proposed project is mostly steep, felling for plantations will expose the soil to direct erosion by rainfall. Sediments could reach the coastal mangrove vegetation in Cowie Bay, depleting marine resources. Consequences are already apparent: with only 12,000 hectares logged the Danum Valley has been recently flooded. Local microclimate will also be affected because often once the rainforest is replaced with a plantation it will dry and heat up. Additionally, this could create negative conditions for the plantation itself, which would become more prone to fires.

The effects of pulping and bleaching are also threatening. The use of chlorine in bleaching the pulp has caused the industry to be the third largest source of dioxin and its related compounds in the world. This problem is further compounded by the fact that Malaysia still has no policy on dioxin damage prevention. Carbon dioxide, sulphur oxides and chloroform are some of the polluting gases

emitted by this industry. Furthermore about 300 chemicals, among them organic pollutants, chlorophenolics, acidic and organochlorine compounds have been identified in pulp and paper mill effluents.

To stop further destruction, SAM has called the State Government of Sabah and the Federal Government to halt all further logging activities, take action against the parties that are responsible for logging the 12,000 hectares of forest without an EIA, undertake a comprehensive EIA of the project, seek extensive and genuine feedback from the public in relation to the reviewing of the EIA, review as a whole given the magnitude and scale of its expected environmental impacts. Additionally an international campaign has been launched to oppose this project. Those interested in participating are invited to visit our new web site (www.wrm.org.uy) under Action Alerts - October 2000.

Article based on information from: "International alert to save Sabah Rainforests from Pulp and Paper project in Kalabakan" by Friends of the Earth Malaysia - Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), October 2000.