
Cambodia: Discussion on forest (mis)management

A recent report on sustainable forest management in Cambodia, funded by the Asian Development Bank, has prompted the discussion of this important issue among stakeholders. The report states that the management of the country's forests is a "total systems failure" since "at the current level of cut every concession will be logged out within seven years", and recommends immediate reforms.

Forestry officials, logging concessionaires and representatives of civil society expressed their respective viewpoints during a workshop that took place on April 20th and 21st in Phnom Penh. According to the Cambodia Timber Industry Association the report was unfair to the concessionaires, making them responsible for the present situation, while the real culprits would be "illegal loggers, many of which are powerful entities within the military and provincial authorities". But even though members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces are involved in illegal logging (see WRM Bulletin 22), concessionaires themselves usually cut forest beyond the limits established in their contracts. At the same time, according to the report, officials of the Forestry Department work on behalf of the concessionaires.

A three-member international panel of forestry experts -who led the above workshop- will be issuing a summary of key recommendations, among which the following would be included:

- Local communities must have access to forest resources as is the right under law as well as customary use. This use must be taken into consideration under Sustainable Forest Management plans.
- The panel noted that many workshop participants felt that environmental and social values were not given enough emphasis in the report.
- Standards for sustainable forest management should include the requirement of an environmental and social impact assessment
- For all concessions, the Government should implement a one-year partial moratorium consistent with a 75 per cent cutting reduction as recommended by the Cambodian Timber Industry Association.
- Concessionaires who do not meet performance milestones within one month after receiving notification from the Department of Forestry and Wildlife that they have lapsed in their commitment should have their concessions cancelled.

A member of the panel was reported as stating: "It remains for the sovereign Government to set the pace of change. The pace must be fast if the country is not to suffer irredeemable loss to a priceless heritage and to the resource base on which so much of its peoples' present and future livelihood depends." Will the pace be set on time?

Article based on information from: "ADB report sparks talks on forest crisis" by Stephen O'Connell, Phnom Penh Post, Issue 9/9, April 28-May 11, 2000; Global Witness, "The Untouchables. Forest crimes and the concessionaires - can Cambodia afford to keep them?", London, December 1999

