
Papua New Guinea: Friends and foes of the logging ban

The announcement by Papua New Guinea (PNG) Prime Minister Mekere Morauta in December 1999 of his intention to impose a moratorium on new logging and extensions, and to review existing logging concessions was enthusiastically received by national and international environmental NGOs, as well as by local small sawmill operators, which consider that any new large-scale logging concessions should be stopped in a country that has already lost more than 10% of its forests because of this depredatory activity (see WRM Bulletin 30).

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's initiative is being hampered in several ways. On the one hand, as expected, the dominant foreign log export companies have kept silence regarding the moratorium. The PNG Eco-Forestry Forum -an association of environmental, social and academic organisations aimed at promoting eco-forestry and that support the development of the small-scale sawmilling industry in the country- has recently declared that "it is time for the logging companies to publicly support the Government's review."

On the other hand, there is significant pressure mounting in several parts of the country to grant exemptions to the announced moratorium. Logging entrepreneurs, sometimes in collusion with local authorities, are either trying to put pressure on the government or just practising a "fait accompli" policy to avoid the ban. For example, in Madang Province, eyewitnesses have reported a large number of new machines belonging to Heaco company on the beach at Bogia, ready to start logging. This company does not even have the necessary timber license to operate in PNG.

Agriculture and forestry development projects associated with road-line clearances constitute another threat to the moratorium. In Western Province a conflict has arisen between the PNG Forest Authority and Concorde Pacific logging company, which is seeking for the extension of the Kiunga Aeanbak Road into the southern Highlands. Next to Collingwood Bay, in Oro Province, Calypso Development Co. intends to log, plant rice and breed cattle in the area. There is also pending an oil palm plantation project in the Tauri-Lakekamau area of the Gulf and Morobe Provinces, which counts on the support of the provincial government.

The Eco-Forestry Forum has expressed its determination to support the government's initiative to halt large scale logging, since " . . . the moratorium and review of existing licences will enable PNG to change course to a forestry industry that delivers the maximum social, economic and environmental benefits". This certainly makes sense and should be the usual approach in forest-rich countries such as PNG.

Source: Glenn Barry, 11/2/2000