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## Solomon Islands: small-scale scores much better

The Solomon Islands, an archipelago of Melanesia in the South Pacific Ocean, are an independent state since 1978. The country's economy is based on agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Its territory has undergone a severe process of deforestation and consequent soil erosion in exposed areas. For example, in 1995 the government ordered the logging of all trees on Pavuvu island and their residents were relocated under protest. A relevant actor behind the scenes have been the forestry industry, concentrated in a few hands -mostly foreigners- and very influent over the national timber policy. At the same time, the government has promoted unsustainable logging practices seeking the benefits derived from the taxes applied to the timber industry.

A report recently released by Greenpeace and based on a research in environmental economics, has found that small-scale, environmentally friendly developments in the Marovo Lagoon area, located in the Western Province -such as fishing, carving, eco-timber and eco-tourism- are worth three times more than industrial developments, such as logging and palm oil plantations. The Marovo Lagoon is a 100 kilometer-long coral reef and island ecosystem sheltering 12 major islands and some 200 islets, and has been described as the "eighth wonder of the world". The report "Islands Adrift? Comparing Industrial and Small Scale Economic Options for Marovo Lagoon Region of the Solomon Islands" by Christopher LaFranchi -an independent resource economist- found that small-scale options were worth U\$S 29 million to land owners while industrial developments were worth only U\$S 8.2 million. Cash benefits from small-scale options reach U\$S 11,000 per household, 4 times that of logging and palm oil plantations.

The research also found that industrial developments have serious environmental and social risks to the local population. Further logging, proposed oil palm plantations, and mining could potentially have extreme environmental impacts on local marine resource use worth more than U\$S 31 million.

Oil palm plantation expansion is a threat to the environment and the local communities in South Asian countries as well as in Melanesia. In this case, the proposal of oil palm plantations promoted by Malaysian company Kumpulan Emas is based on incorrect soil information: claimed highly fertile, well drained and suited to oil palm, soils were in fact of poor fertility and susceptible to erosion. Furthermore, oil palm development proposal for the Marovo Lagoon area lacks an independent Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, as well as studies concerning the likely sedimentation impacts on the lagoon as a result of forest clearance and land contouring.

The report also provides several recommendations concerning the management of the studied area:

- 1) No logging or palm oil plantations should be permitted in the Marovo lagoon area, given the identified environmental and social risks of industrial developments, and the greater economic benefits of small-scale developments
- 2) Sylvania Products Ltd's license over alienated land on Vangunu Island should not be renewed after its expiry in May 1999. The Western Province and Solomon Island National Government should return the alienated land to the indigenous owners, and help them complete a land-use planning process for conservation and small-scale development. This should work in conjunction with the land-use planning process carried out by the Ministry of Forests, Environment and Conservation (1995)

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- 3) Indigenous landowners of Vangunu should visit Guadalcanal plains to review the impacts of the palm oil plantation and the Gold Ridge mining operation
  - 4). Western Province Development Authority should help local communities establish, manage and market village-based eco-businesses such as eco-timber and eco-tourism
  - 5) Decisions about mining in the Marovo area should be deferred until further economic research is available, and until independently audited and public environmental and social impact assessments have been carried out. These assessments must be appropriate to the scale and nature of the proposals, and available to the public
  - 6) Donor governments and regional institutions should review their natural resource development policies for Melanesia. In particular, donor support for large-scale forest conversion to plantation developments and industrial logging should be halted. Any forestry or plantation operations should meet Forest Stewardship Council standards. A financial package aimed at reducing government dependence on industrial tax revenue should be considered
  - 7) Governments and institutions should adopt small scale to medium scale developments as the preferred option for Melanesian communities that want to maximise employment, conserve their natural resources and sustain their cultures.

"This report confirms that the Solomon Islands are rich in local resources, essential for maintaining and improving the quality of life of local villagers, and that industrial-scale options are not appropriate for Melanesia," said Greenpeace Pacific forest campaigner Grant Rosoman. According to this view Greenpeace is urging donor governments and regional institutions to review any support they may be giving to industrial-scale activities in Solomon Islands, and favour of adopting small to medium scale development options instead.

The WRM International Secretariat has received a copy of the report, which is fully illustrated with photographs, maps and tables. Those interested in receiving it, please contact Grant Rosoman.

Sources: Grant Rosoman, Forests Campaigner Greenpeace Pacific, The World Guide 1997/98.