
[World Bank forest policy labyrinth](#)

In 1991 the World Bank adopted a forest policy that resulted from a process of extensive consultation with the international NGO community. One of the main points of this policy was that it bans direct funding for logging in primary forests. These represent only 20% of the forest cover of the Planet and are to be found in the Amazon, Canada's Pacific Northwest and the taiga in Siberia. As a request of the Bank's Board, the policy was to be reviewed three years after its entry into force, but this period proved to be too short for a complete review. The review has not been accomplished yet. Nevertheless, some parties within the Bank are promoting a change in the present policy without any evaluation of its results. At a senior meeting of the Bank held in November 14, 1997, changes in this policy were discussed and special attention was paid to the elimination of the ban. Since an official document of the Bank stated that such changes were being supported by some mainstream NGOs, a network of 113 NGOs from 35 countries -among which the WRM and part of its member organizations-addressed the WB by means of an open letter on December 10, 1997, expressing their opposition to the suspected changes, since they "risk opening the floodgates for large investments in unsustainable forest operations, thereby further contributing to the world's forest crisis".

The 1998 Forest Sector Strategy and Policy Review announced by the Bank -that includes a forest market transformation, an alliance with WWF and an outreach to timber companies- have caused unrest in the NGO community. According to the Bank Information Center (BIC) "the general direction in which the Bank seems to be heading is towards engagement with the private sector and 'sustainable' logging".

Concern has increased after the so called "CEO meeting", that took place in Washington on January 9. It was chaired by Mr. James D. Wolfensohn -President of the WB- and attended by thirteen Chief Executive Officers of industry (among which some "bad guys" coming from companies very well known by their destructive logging activities, for example Mohammed Hasan, head of the Indonesian Wood Panel Association, a logging company plagued with widespread allegations of environmental and human rights abuses), five NGO representatives (Conservation International, IUCN, World Resources Institute, WWF and World Wide Fund for Nature) and an official of the Russian Ministry of Economy. NGOs that severely question the notion of "sustainable logging" as well as representatives from Southern countries and indigenous peoples were excluded, even if -or perhaps, because- they come from the regions at greater risk from intensified logging. Since no controversial issues were addressed the mood of the meeting was by all means constructive and candid.

Not-attending NGOs have expressed a number of concerns about the meeting: Is the process to be kept among a closed circle that includes Wolfensohn, his industry buddies and some major NGOs, or will it be open to broad civil society? Is participation in the Issue Papers that have been commissioned guaranteed also to NGOs that have been at odds with the CEO group? How can the CEO group be considered "informal" and at the same time "action-oriented" as the Bank states? Is it of any use, or even ethic, to avoid the issue of the worst industry practitioners? Is it adequate that the WB support "voluntary standards" proposed by the industry instead of state or international regulations? Last but not least: is this meeting separate from the current revision of the forest policy review of the Bank, as it adamantly insists?

The still remaining primary forests are at risk of getting lost in the Bank forestry policy labyrinth.