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by **TIM CURTIN**

## Sustainable and legal logging

The Papua New Guinea Eco-Forestry Forum, in a notable display of unpatriotic behaviour, recently wrote to Yale University to complain that the latter had been cited by the Forest Industries Association as deeming PNG's forestry sustainable, defined as "no more than 3% of timber net harvesting per year".

Yale's Melissa Goodall (of its Centre of Environmental Law & Policy) replied to Damien Ase, chairperson of the PNG Eco-Forestry Forum, on June 11 to claim that the Yale group had now decided that in fact "existing management practices are not sustainable in Papua New Guinea".

There are some reasons to doubt the credibility of Ms Goodall and her team.

Yale did indeed give Papua New Guinea a clean bill of health on forestry issues in both of its 2005 and 2006 reports setting out their "Environmental Performance Index" (EPI).

For example, in Yale's 2005 Report, PNG was ranked 22nd out of all non-OECD countries, or about 47th in the whole world, for the quality of its overall record on environmental management and other indicators (including such items as level of democracy, on which PNG scored 100%).

PNG was actually ranked ahead of Netherlands, the US and UK.

PNG's overall EPI ranking in Yale's 2005 report was 35th out of 146 countries, and since around 80% of its people live in its forest areas, which account for 75% of its land mass, they must be doing not just something but a lot right in terms of sustainable management of natural resources, which overwhelmingly comprise its timber and tree crop output that far exceed mineral production in value per PNG citizen.

Ms Goodall's letter cites what are in fact wholly-unfounded allegations by the World Bank that "70% of the (timber) harvest in PNG is illegally obtained".

The World Bank has never provided any evidence for this claim, and has indeed admitted that it was based only on claims concerning Indonesia.

The facts on sustainability of logging in PNG are much less dramatic.

The largest log timber exporters from PNG are Vanimo Forest Products, Stettin Bay Lumber Company, Open Bay, Jant, Rimbunan Hijau, and PNG Forest Products (PNGFP).

All of them are fully compliant with all relevant PNG legislation, and have all been in operation for at least 20 years, over 50 years in the case of PNGFP.

If their harvesting was "unsustainable" and therefore, according to the World Bank and its NGO associates like the World Wildlife Fund, "illegal", how have they managed to maintain production for on average 30 years or more?

The NGOs that unite in claiming that PNG's forestry industry is "unsustainable" and thus "illegal" base themselves on unsubstantiated allegations that any timber harvesting that exceeds 0.7 cubic metre per hectare per annum is illegal. That amounts to about two wheelbarrows of wood per hectare a year.

Why are PNG's timber exporters castigated by the Eco-Forestry Forum for exceeding this absurdly low level when for example, Tasmania's Labor government's state-owned forests routinely harvest over 100 cubic metres per hectare over a 17-year cycle (ie six cubic metres per hectare per year)?

There is a simple answer to this question – the Forum has its own hands out for subsidies from aid donors for funding of its own hopelessly inefficient community logging projects that so far have generated NO income, NO wage employment, NO revenues for the government, and NO export revenue.

Tasmania's remarkably high-harvesting rates show what could be achieved in PNG if its people would only see through the bogus credentials of the Eco-Forestry Forum, whose national members (if any, other than Damien Ase) seek only to ingratiate themselves with Greenpeace and the like, and then put in place the institutional arrangements that would allow exploitation of PNG's vastly larger forest resource on the same scale as Tasmania's Labor government achieves.

Using the McAlpine-Quigley very-conservative estimate that PNG's commercially viable forestry

area is only eight times larger than Tasmania Forest's area of 776,500 hectares, PNG could be earning A\$2.4 billion (about K5.9 billion) a year from its forestry, instead of the pathetic K520 million that the "patriotic" PNG Eco-Forestry Forum considers to be too much.

*Note: The writer teaches at the Australian National University and has served in various capacities with several organisations that have taken him from England, India, some African countries and PNG. He was a consultant for the PNG Government's Office of Bougainville Affairs in 2000-2001 and assisted in setting up the autonomous government of Bougainville.*





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