
Forests Plunder: discourse of 'sustainability' hides destruction caused by logging

Industrial logging – the large-scale removal of trees - in tropical forests is a significant cause of forest loss. The on-going devastation of forests in Africa, Asia and South and Central America is directly connected to distant markets, largely in industrialised countries, demanding wood from few tropical hardwood species that sell for high prices (1). Contrary to what most governments and logging companies say, industrial logging does not translate into lasting improvement of local welfare. Impoverishment and social disintegration are regular consequences of industrial logging with corruption frequently at the core of their practices. Women are disproportionately affected since the forest products they traditionally use and manage disappear with the forest. Industrial logging often violates the territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples and other traditional communities, who are the rightful owners of the forest. Potential local resistance in turn results in State repression for protecting the companies' legal 'rights' (see [WRM Bulletin 53](#) and [WRM Bulletin 98](#)).

After being targeted by strong NGO campaigns, some logging corporations started to show willingness to improve their performance, or rather, their public image. Among other initiatives, the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) processes were established. The reasoning behind was that as long as forest legislation is complied with (e.g. respecting annual allowable cuts, concession boundaries and other legal requirements) and governments play their role adequately, the outcome will be positive to forests and the forestry sector will be considered as having 'good governance'. Despite legal changes acknowledging forest peoples' rights that such a process might bring, it also enables industrial scale timber trade to continue and expand its business - under the banner of legality and with a clean image.

Logging corporations rely on the State to take out loans from 'development banks' like the World Bank to provide access to remote areas, grant subsidies, control and/or repress possible local resistance, etc. It is also governments that award logging concessions to corporations, allowing companies to claim to be operating 'within the law'. But often, industrial logging concessions create more harm than 'illegal' logging activities. How far are concessions granted to logging companies in Africa legitimate, where millions of hectares of forests are being exploited, very often undermining communities' territories and their right to have their own management? In tropical forests, the majority of tree species are scarce per hectare and generally few of them are used by the timber trade, so industrial logging in tropical forests is almost invariably 'selective'. Although this term might appear less harmful than 'clear-cutting', in fact, a larger area of the forest is affected. Legal or illegal, the reality is that industrial scale logging not only affects thousands of hectares of forests and the communities that are dependant on these forests, but also alters the water cycle, degrades the soil, increases surface temperature and releases the carbon dioxide in the trees to the atmosphere. Above all, it opens up previously unfragmented areas of forest to further industrial exploitation.

Selective logging affects 28% of tropical forests worldwide. According to a Greenpeace report (2),

between 2.9 and 4.1 million hectares of primary forest in Papua New Guinea had already been selectively logged by 2002, and around half of its total forested land (16.3 million hectares) is under concessions and thus under threat as a result of logging. In Indonesia, 42 million hectares of forest are in logging concessions, while across Central Africa, logging concessions cover nearly 40 million hectares. Remote sensing found that selective logging in the Amazon doubled the area of forest degraded by human activities. Roads and related infrastructure constructed to provide access to and extract timber and other 'resources', increases rates of deforestation and forest degradation.

The remaining forests are also changed. With several of the forest's vital seed and crop trees cut, 'low-impact' logging leaves 20 to 50 percent of the canopy open, when, as a study from Bioscience points out (3), in tropical forests, "even small openings in the canopy (5-10 percent) can have significant impacts on the moisture content in the forest and increase risk of fire". The same study found that just three rounds of logging in tropical forests resulted in the near-extinction of target tree species in all major tropical forest zones -South and Central America, Central Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Most logging companies simply enter a forest, cut high-value tree species, and then leave the concession for cattle ranchers, agribusiness or monoculture tree plantation companies (such as pulp and paper, rubber, or palm oil) to move in. The same study revealed that logging companies generally move from one tropical forest area to the next, always looking for increasing profits. In Indonesia for example, after logging out most of the forests in Borneo, loggers moved into places like Sumatra. Now that forests on Sumatra have been looted - and many areas previously under logging concession turned into monoculture tree plantations - industrial logging companies move on to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Tropical forests are vanishing worldwide.

The false promise of 'Sustainable Forest Management'

During the Earth Summit in Brazil in 1992, governments from industrialized countries, supported by corporations, put forward the concept of 'Sustainable Forest Management' (SFM) within the framework of 'sustainable development'. SFM was identified as a key strategy to achieve "positive social and economic benefits without compromising tropical forest ecosystem function". International partnerships among governments, conservation NGOs, multilateral banks and timber companies coalesced to advance SFM implementation. In practice, SFM turned into another top-down so-called 'solution' to deforestation, which allowed an inherently destructive activity to be presented as positive and 'sustainable' - this time, with the additional promise of 'development'.

Industrial logging companies claim that they create jobs and essential infrastructure like schools, hospitals and roads to vulnerable communities through practising SFM. This discourse creates the impression of a logging industry respecting the rights of affected communities, and that future generations will be able to sustain their livelihood from the area being logged. The reality is, however, that the veil of SFM hides a rather devastating activity, which no PR campaign can make sustainable, and that certainly does provide lasting benefit to local populations. In fact, most of the times communities lose more than they gain right from the moment the logging companies enter their territories.

The so-called private-public-partnerships between governments, corporations and conservation NGOs also developed market instruments based on certified wood and other forest products, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. FSC aims to supply the global market with as much certified wood as possible. The only way to move in that direction, however, is to certify as many large-scale operations as possible. Besides, FSC certification relies on the good will of

consumers to help bring about changes in forest management, and not on actually reducing consumption (see the [WRM website for a selection](#) of the main critiques and problems with certification schemes).

Research on the forests of the Republic of Congo from the University of Michigan, US, (4) exposed that while concessions run by European companies had the highest rates of 'Sustainable Forest Management' compliance, they also had the highest rates of deforestation. European concession holders were also more likely to implement the government-approved Forest Management Plan (as required by the Congolese forestry law), and the only concessions to achieve FSC certification. Nonetheless, high rates of forest fragmentation were observed in those concessions associated to the construction of roads for highly selective logging. European markets demand timber from only a few target tree species, and dense road networks are necessary to find those species in sufficient numbers to generate the desired corporate profits. Asian and Congolese markets on the other side, accept a wider variety of 'lower value' species. As a result, the road network in concessions operated by Asian and Congolese corporations are less dense and forest fragmentation remains lower. The research in the Republic of Congo demonstrated a direct link between SFM compliance and increased deforestation.

The same research warns that over 400 million hectares of tropical forests are now under concession for timber production, and a growing proportion of the logging is labelled SFM. Researchers conclude that, "forest clearing and fragmentation of intact forests in Congo is driven by industrial logging made possible in large part by international capital investment". Adding that, "If, in fact, SFM policy and certified timber markets are associated with increased forest cover change [degradation and deforestation], this suggests that the growing global demand for legal and certified timber may have unexpected [negative] consequences for intact tropical forest ecosystems".

The on-going demand of tropical wood has fuelled the expansion of transnational corporations involved in every stage of the production process, from raw material extraction, through manufacturing, to marketing and distribution. The actors involved in industrial logging of tropical forests vary from country to country, but the main ones are usually transnational corporations. Irrespective of the country they operate in, however, what feeds the destruction is continued demand for more wood, in particular for consumption in industrialized countries. The US, for example, is the second largest importer of tropical timber, shelling out more than US\$5.4 billion annually for 21 million cubic meters of industrial roundwood, sawnwood, veneer, and plywood from the tropics (5). Moreover, the mayor players behind the certification schemes for labelling wood as 'sustainable' are corporate players with vested interests in continue business as usual (6).

Forest-dependent communities most affected

Industrial logging takes a major toll on the communities that live with and depend on forests. The damage is caused first and foremost by the fact that the logging is destructive, that its perpetrators are outsiders that 'loot and run' and that the logging is often linked to human rights abuses. Whether the devastation is considered legal or illegal is secondary for those left with their livelihood and way of life destroyed, as is the widespread corporate-government corruption and bribery that characterizes the industrial logging sector. Weak or absent recognition of land titles for forest peoples' territories and increasing areas access to these forests through roads and extractive projects like mining or oil exploration, make it easy for industrial logging companies to enter territories of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities. This not only degrades and destroys the forests that communities need to survive. It also brings violence, threats and persecution to those who stand to defend the forested territories against this corrupt and greedy industry.

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1. Blaser, J. et al, 2011, ITTO, Estado de la ordenación de los bosques tropicales 2011, <http://es.slideshare.net/Leyre7/estado-de-la-ordenacin-de-los-bosques-tropicales-2011>
 2. Greenpeace, Why logging will not save the climate: the fallacy of GHG emissions reductions from so-called 'Sustainable Forest Management' or Reduced Impact Logging of natural forests, <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/publications/reports/why-logging-will-not-save-the/>
 3. Experts: sustainable logging in the rainforest impossible, <http://news.mongabay.com/2012/0718-hance-sustainable-logging.html>
 4. Brandt, J., Nolte, C., Steinberg, J. and Agrawal, A. (2014), Forest capital, forest change and regulatory compliance in Congo Basin forests, <http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/9/4/044007/article>
 5. Logging: timber certification, trade restrictions, Mongabay, 2012, <http://rainforests.mongabay.com/1010.htm>
 6. See for example the role the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) in the "Sustainable Forestry Initiative" certification: <http://www.forestethics.org/sustainable-forestry-initiative-issue>