
Malaysia : Fake logging certification on Penan lands

On 18 October 2004, Samling Plywood, the Malaysian timber corporation, was granted a Certificate for Forest Management under the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) for the alleged sustainable logging of one of Sarawak's last remaining contiguous areas of primary rainforest.

About 80 percent of the certified concession area is traditional Penan territory where they traditionally lived as nomads before becoming settled under British influence in the middle of the 20th century. Now there are in the area at least 410 households with a population of an estimated 2000 persons.

Although the Penan started with shifting cultivation of hill rice after becoming settled, they still largely depend upon the primary rainforest for hunting and gathering which provides for an important part of their dietary needs (proteins, fruits etc.). The primary rainforest is also the source of Penan culture and mythology and is home to many sites of great importance to the Penan such as ancestral graves, the ipoh tree providing poison for darts, sago palms, wild rattan plants, and sandalwood trees. Apart from the Penan, there are also an unknown number of other Dayak people living in the area.

“We have been living here in peace until the timber companies came to disturb our life and encroach into our forest.” On behalf of the Penan signing the letter, headman Bilong Oyau wrote, “Many of us have suffered due to the Samling logging operations: our rivers are polluted, our sacred sites damaged and our animals chased away by people who deprive us of our livelihood and culture. (...) We cannot accept that Samling is now awarded with a certificate to continue offending our native customary rights.” The Penan in these communities are also complaining about the substantial damage to their drinking water supplies as a result of the logging.

Even though the Penan have opposed resistance to the destruction of their lands and rainforests, setting up blockades to prevent the transit of logging machinery and trucks, the MTCC did not consult them prior to the certification of their forest. Furthermore, information obtained in 2001 by the earth imaging satellite IKONOS indicates that the forestry practiced by Samling in this particular concession is anything but sustainable. The severe destruction of the forest is visible even in low resolution.

Samling only gained access to the now certified area by relying on the use of police and military force, and it has only been able to extract timber from the area against the declared will of the affected communities in open violation of their human rights. The Penan communities appealed to the MTCC to immediately revoke the certificate.

This is one more example of a fake green stamp awarded to a socially and environmentally destructive activity such as industrial logging. For huge companies it is just another marketing tool to gain more markets, often that of well intentioned people from Northern countries who --far from the site-- believe they are thus contributing to forest conservation.

Article based on information from: “Penan protest against the certified logging of the last primeval forests of Sarawak (Malaysia)”, and “Report on the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC)

certification of the Sela'an-Linau Forest Management Unit in the Ulu Baram area of Sarawak / Malaysia", sent by Lukas Straumann, Bruno Manser Fonds, e-mail: bmf@bmf.ch