
Papua New Guinea: Rainforest Alliance undermining forest conservation efforts

The American based Rainforest Alliance is undermining the efforts of local conservation groups in Papua New Guinea struggling to combat widespread illegal and unsustainable logging.

The Alliance's Smartwood Program has refused to withdraw its certification of the forest operations of a company that is part of a multinational group accused of widespread illegal logging and human rights abuses in PNG and other parts of the world including SE Asia and Africa. The Rainforest Alliance has chosen to maintain its commercial relationship with this company despite 12 months of protests from civil society groups in PNG.

The incredibly rich and diverse rainforests in Papua New Guinea are universally acclaimed both for their biological importance and their subsistence value to local human populations. But large areas of this forest are being destroyed through illegal logging by foreign companies.

Although the Rainforest Alliance makes prominent claims that 'companies, cooperatives and landowners that participate in our programs meet rigorous standards that conserve biodiversity and provide sustainable livelihoods', this is not borne out by the evidence from Papua New Guinea.

In PNG companies that form part of the same multinational conglomerate as that certified by Smartwood in New Zealand have been clearly identified as involved in widespread illegal logging and gross environmental destruction. This group of companies has also been exposed for its appalling employment conditions, its use of illegal foreign labour and its participation in human rights abuses against local indigenous populations.

The group's companies in New Zealand trade in tropical timber and manage softwood plantations. Some of these plantations are certified by the Rainforest Alliance as meeting the requirements of the Forest Stewardship Council. This certification gives international credibility and an aura of respectability to an international business that is condemned by local civil society groups in PNG.

In February 2004, the PNG Eco-Forestry Forum complained to Smartwood about its certification of the forest operations of the company in New Zealand. The Forum specifically raised the issue that a subsidiary of the certified company was importing illegal timber from Papua New Guinea and that it was part of a group responsible for illegal and destructive logging and human rights abuses in PNG and elsewhere. The same concerns were raised in New Zealand with the Timber Importers Association and the Tropical Timber Trade Group.

Both organisations were moved by the appalling nature of the abuses uncovered and the very strong evidence that was presented. Both immediately moved to expel the particular forest management company from their organisations; decisions that were later upheld in the NZ High Court (NZ Timber Importers Association Media Release, 12 December 2004).

New Zealand's five largest timber merchants also responded positively to the complaints and they

issued a declaration that they would not purchase timber from the multinational group (The Independent (NZ), 28th July 2004).

In contrast to these examples of corporate responsibility and ethical decision making, Smartwood chose to reject the complaint from the Forum – after five months of deliberation – and endorse the FSC certification of the tainted company. In doing so Smartwood relied on a narrow and legalistic interpretation of FSC rules rather than taking to opportunity to review its on-going commercial relationship with one of the world's worst forest destroyers.

The Eco-Forestry Forum immediately appealed the Smartwood decision in the hope that the Rainforest Alliance would understand the seriousness of the situation and review its position. But, in November 2004, after a further delay of more than four months, the Eco-Forestry Forum was informed by the Rainforest Alliance that its appeal had been rejected.

The Forum immediately responded, noting 'We are very disappointed that Smartwood and the Rainforest Alliance have ultimately decided to protect the commercial interests of a company engaged in widespread illegal logging and gross human rights abuses rather than supporting the interests of indigenous people and advancing the sustainable management of our rainforests'.

In the meantime complaints about the same group of logging companies were raised by civil society groups in Australia. The Australian Federal Minister for Forests immediately responded with a statement acknowledging that most timber exported from PNG was from illegal sources. This was followed in November 2004 by a statement (by Senator Ian MacDonald) that the Australian government would move to frame legislation to ban the importation of tropical timber from illegal sources.

This action by the Conservative Government in Australia stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the Rainforest Alliance and the position taken by its Smartwood Program.

Illegal logging operations destroy vast areas of forest every year and bring social disharmony and other serious negative impacts for rural people in Papua New Guinea and many other parts of the world.

It is very hard for the Forum to understand why large conservation groups should be in commercial relationships with these companies and be giving them international credibility through forest certification of any part of their global operations. The actions of the Rainforest Alliance undermine all the efforts of local groups to combat illegal and destructive logging.

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