
Melanesia: Community-Based Ecoforestry Protecting Forests

Melanesia, which includes Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kanaky (New Caledonia), Fiji, East Timor and West Papua (Indonesia), is unique in the world in that 95% of land is still under community ownership by the indigenous people. The forests they control are part of the largest remaining rainforest in the Asia Pacific region and the 3rd largest tropical forest on Earth after the Amazon and Congo. Illegal and destructive industrial logging is rampant, mainly by Malaysian companies who have moved from Sarawak and elsewhere in Asia as the forests were exhausted. Associated with logging comes poor governance, corruption, lack of control and monitoring, and a situation where landowners receive very little financial benefit and suffer disastrous social and environmental impacts.

In response, for the last 15 years NGOs have targeted community forest management as a solution to the crisis in the forests and to support the customary forest owners. There is a wealth of successful examples of community forestry programmes as well as some that didn't last but were instructive in discovering the formula for success. Programmes have included: Village Development Trust, Pacific Heritage Foundation, Foundation for People and Community Development (FPCD), and EU Island Regional Environment Programme (all Papua New Guinea), Solomon Western Isles Fair Trade, and Solomon Is Ecoforestry Programme (Greenpeace and SIDT).

Most programmes have focused on training and marketing support. The Solomon Is Ecoforestry Programme has trained 56 landowning groups and is currently supporting 'ecotimber' production and exports providing a net value to communities of US\$520,000 in the last 5 years. The some 14,600 people in the communities are now enjoying improved housing, education, transport, communication and health services, as well as protecting their 40,000 ha of forest from logging.

The social benefits from ecoforestry are often overlooked, explains Geoff Mamata Dennis of Greenpeace in Solomon Is, "Better understanding and good relationships between members in the communities is increasingly harmonious."

"This makes people to be more responsible for their own lives. Eco-forestry projects have been successful in providing an alternative solution to large-scale foreign-owned logging operations in the Solomon Islands and more people are becoming aware of the benefits eco-forestry provides," said Geoffrey Dennis.

According to landowner Reedle Gebe, project manager of the Lobi Village Eco-forestry Project in western Solomon Is: "Eco-forestry is much better than logging. I prefer eco-forestry because it does not spoil our sea, land, rivers and water catchment."

In Madang province of Papua New Guinea, FPCD has been working with a landowner association with 80 members who want to mill timber themselves from their forests. They have been focusing on exporting to achieve prices that recognise the hard work involved in community forestry.

Bon Leon, a member of the landowner association, says the people are very happy with ecoforestry:

“We protect our ground and make money. I used to work for the [logging] company. I think if a big company was to come it would wreck our place.”

In Papua New Guinea NGOs are now focusing their attention on supporting landowners in the huge western forest areas that are the current target of logging companies. After ejecting the Malaysian logging company Concord Pacific (a subsidiary of Samling) from their lands, the Lake Murray Resource Owners Association is looking to community forest management and support from NGOs as the answer for the protection of their 1.4 million hectares.

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