
Malaysia: How to destroy forests in Sarawak by planting trees

The case of Sarawak is probably one of the best ones to show the importance of definitions. Tree plantations have been defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as "planted forests" and the entire forestry profession -the "experts"- is totally unwilling to revisit such definition. The reason is that it serves their purposes -including their image and budgets- very well.

This also applies to the government of Sarawak, which has for years been handing over the forests of the indigenous peoples to logging companies, and has recently discovered the importance of embracing the "planted forest" approach. Its idea is to continue business as usual -destroying the forests- but promoting itself to the world as an environmentally conscious state.

In a world of make believe, the press reported that Chief Minister Taib had said that "Sarawak has not only positioned itself in the world by achieving a standard practice for sustainable forest management but also modernised its timber industry" and that "with this achievement, the industry has stepped into an era of modernisation." Even more, Taib stated that "by being successful in managing planted forests, Sarawak could serve as a model state for other countries to emulate."

He later explained what this "achievement" was all about. "The State government has even set aside 30 percent of the timber concession areas to be converted into planted forest." Taib added that the planting of fast growing species is essential to ensure the natural resources in the State would not be exhausted. Taib also said that the government has allowed certain portion within the concession areas to be planted with oil palms to enable operators to fund the replanting process. "Research has also provided ways of planting fast growing tree species to replenish the State's forest resources and ensure production continuity." Out of the 12 million hectares of land in the State, 6 million will be devoted to "planted forests."

The above will mean the final destruction, not only of the diverse tropical forest of Sarawak, but also of the livelihoods of the indigenous forest peoples who inhabit them. However, under the FAO definition, nothing will have essentially changed: "forest cover" will be maintained, with a "different species composition" -oil palm, acacia, eucalyptus and a few other species. What seems obvious to almost anyone -that monoculture plantations are no substitute for forests- seems to be unintelligible to the FAO's forestry "experts."

How many forests need to be destroyed and substituted by monoculture tree plantations for the FAO to accept that its definition is all wrong? How many forest peoples will see their livelihoods disappear to deserts of trees before it is accepted that plantations are not forests? When will foresters understand what a forest is?

Sources: Borneo Post, 8 March 2000; Sarawak Tribune, 8th March 2000

