



CONFERENCE 2005

OPINION PIECE

FORESTS, WOODS AND LIVELIHOODS

Finding a Future for All

Australia's stake in the Asia-Pacific's forests

Mention forests in Australia and the mental compass of most Australians will point south to Tasmania. But it's to the north of Australia where the country's national interest and forests most intersect – in the tropical rainforests of the Asia-Pacific.

Unlike ever before, the region needs Australia's forestry expertise. Unlike ever before, forestry is now vitally important to Australia and the region's peace and prosperity. Not surprisingly, these issues feature highly at a major international conference on "Forests, Wood and Livelihoods" hosted by the Crawford Fund in Canberra this week.

Forests make a huge contribution to reducing poverty in the developing economies on Australia's doorstep. In the Solomons, half the country's export revenue comes from forests. In Indonesia, the figure in 2004 was 13 percent – more than double the amount it received in foreign aid.

For PNG, the figure is \$170 million annually, which is a tidy sum for a population of 5.5 million. Regrettably, most of this money goes to Malaysian logging companies with little interest in PNG's development.

Each of these countries benefit significantly from Australia's generosity, either in the form of taxpayers' aid dollars, technical assistance or military support. And in each of these countries, the future of forests looks shaky at best.

If forestry no longer provides jobs and income to the needy – whether due to over-harvesting, illegal logging, fires, conflict or simply bad management – regional stability will suffer and dependency on Australian aid may increase.

Much of Australia's aid focuses on helping governments become more efficient, transparent and accountable – the hallmarks of good governance. And yet for much of the region, forests are synonymous with the exact opposite – bribery, tax evasion and human rights abuse. It is no wonder Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared fighting illegal logging as one of his Government's top priorities along with eradicating corruption. For him it is not just a question of a few billion dollars in unpaid taxes. It is about establishing the rule of law and attracting international investors. It is about improving his nation's reputation, providing jobs, reducing poverty and, ultimately, ensuring social stability.

The Crawford Fund wishes to thank the sponsors for this event:

Alliance of Future Harvest Centers of the CGIAR, AusAID, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, Australian Forest Growers, Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, A3P - Australian Plantation Products and Paper Industry Council, Center for International Forestry Research, CSIRO Livestock Industries, ensis - the joint forces of CSIRO and Scion, Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Corporation, National Association of Forest Industries, World Agroforestry Centre

And the same arguments apply to anywhere in the Asia-Pacific where a dose of good forestry governance could improve the welfare of millions of rural poor.

But let's not forget the environmental issues. Forests are not only about economics. Forests are also about providing clean drinking water, reducing global warming and providing a habitat for endangered species.

We know these things already – yet each year, millions of hectares of forest are lost through illegal logging, and forest fires that inflict enormous environmental and health costs on people and economies across south east Asia.

As unique plants and animals vanish with destruction of the forests, so do important sources of chemicals for medicinal and industrial use. No one can say for certain if a cure for HIV or SARS lays waiting to be discovered under a tropical canopy. But one thing is sure, a cure won't be found in the forest if the forest is no longer there.

Forests are important to Australia's national interest in so many other ways too. None less so than in the links forests have with peace, conflict and regional stability. When the Solomon Islands asked Australia to send troops to help secure law and order, the civil unrest had a lot to do with criminal elements fighting over the nation's precious forest resources.

Conflict over timber also contributed to Fiji's coup five years ago. More generally, much of the violence in Mindanao, Myanmar and elsewhere is due to poor forest governance.

The Australian aid program's focus on building capacity to prevent conflict and instill good governance and sustainable resource management speak directly to many of these issues.

Forest management could benefit enormously from Australia's experience. The Regional Forest Agreement and the way the Federal and State Governments work together are just two examples. Australian universities have a wealth of tropical forest knowledge they can continue to share with future leaders. And Australia's expertise fighting money laundering could be a powerful tool in combating illegal logging.

Australia is highly regarded for its work on poverty, governance, environmentally sustainable development and regional stability. If it wishes to enhance this reputation and continue to advance Australia's national interests, then forests must take a bigger part in its aid program.

David Kaimowitz is the Director General for the Center for International Forestry Research. (d.kaimowitz@cgiar.org). He is the keynote speaker at "Forests, Wood and Livelihood: Finding a Future For All", the annual development conference of the Crawford Fund, being held at Parliament House, Canberra on 16 August