

NATIONAL FOREST POLICY STATEMENT

1. THE FOREST RESOURCES OF SOLOMON ISLANDS

The Solomon Islands has a total land base of 2.8 million hectares, spread over a large number of islands. The population is estimated to be 440,000 (2001), some 75% of whom live in small rural village communities. About 88% of the land is held in customary tenure, and the Constitution guarantees control over the land and forests to the customary owners.

Natural Forests

The natural forests of Solomon Islands cover about 2.2 million hectares, or 80% of the nation's land base. The forest varies significantly, and not all forest types carry commercially significant volumes of timber. From an ecological point of view a high proportion of the forest is not suitable for commercial logging by ground based harvesting systems due to steep slopes and fragile soils. In addition village based communities are significantly dependent on the natural forests for clean water, food supplies and building materials.

The nation's natural forests are being commercially harvested at about 14,000 hectares per annum producing an annual log harvest of about 550,000 m³ (2001), which is mostly exported in log form. Various estimates of the potential sustainable log yield have been made, and these range from around 320,000 m³ per annum down to about 220,000 m³ per annum. At the current rate of log harvest the national exploitable forest resource is expected to be exhausted by about 2010. The resources of some provinces, such as Malaita, are already exhausted.

Plantation Forests

Some 30,000 hectares of forest plantations have been established. Historically these were established on State owned registered land, and were Government owned. Most have been sold to the private sector, and cutting rights have been assigned to the balance where these are merchantable. Effectively the Government has exited from plantation development and ownership. Key private sector plantation owners are Kolombangara Forest Products Ltd (12,400 ha), and Eagon Pacific Plantation Ltd (9,000 ha). Currently the logs produced are mostly exported.

2. THE BENEFITS FORESTS PROVIDE

It is acknowledged that there is a wide range of potential uses to which the natural forests of Solomon Islands can be put. Some uses are consumptive and involve the harvesting of items of value from the forest. Other uses are non-consumptive and their benefits accrue simply because the forest exists.

Non-Consumptive Forest Uses

- Regulation of water run-off and water quality. This is of particular importance to ensuring rural village communities have access to a regular and clean source of water.
- Protection of soils and the avoidance of erosion. This is of particular importance to protecting the quality of the water supplies available to rural village communities; protecting soils used for local gardens; the avoidance of reef siltation and the potentially adverse affect on local fisheries; and the protection of natural land and sea resources which draw tourists.
- Protection and conservation of biodiversity.

Low Impact Consumptive Forest Uses

- Traditional use by rural village communities for hunting and gathering a wide range of non-timber forest products.
- Extraction of commercial quantities of non-wood forest products assessed to have a minor impact on the forest.
- Small scale harvesting of logs without the use of logging machinery (bulldozers);
- Selection logging using heli-logging systems which involve no skid-track or extraction road construction, and landings located on flat terrain.

High Impact Consumptive Forest Uses

- Extraction of commercial quantities of non-wood forest products assessed to have a major impact on the forest.
- Selection logging using ground-based systems (bulldozers) which involve the construction of skid-tracks, extraction roads and landings throughout the forest.

- Clear felling for conversion to forest plantations.
- Clear felling for conversion to non-forest land uses.

Some forest uses are compatible and can co-exist. Some consumptive uses of the forest compromise the ability of the forest to produce other benefits, and under these circumstances careful assessment of priorities is required. Removal of the forest cover, or significant destruction of the forest, will adversely affect the ability of the forest to provide all benefits.

Where commercial quantities of forest products are able to be harvested and sold, then there is also a positive impact on local employment and the cash economy. For many years log exports have been a significant source of income for landowners (through wages and stumpage payments), and revenue (through log export taxes) and foreign exchange earnings for Government.

3. PRIMACY OF THE NATIONAL INTEREST

There will arise situations where the wishes of the customary landowners with regard to the use of their forest will not be in agreement with the good of the nation and Solomon Islands society. For example customary landowners may wish to pursue commercial logging on steep land where timber harvesting is certain to result in soil erosion, water pollution and reef siltation. In these cases the Solomon Island Government will act in the national interest.

4. SOLOMON ISLAND GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Given that an area of forest cannot be used to generate all of the potential benefits a forest can provide at the same time, and that some consumptive forest uses adversely impact on the ability of the forest to produce other benefits, then priority benefits need to be identified which are in the national interest.

Priority Forest Uses

The priority forest uses accepted by the Solomon Island Government are set out in order of importance as follows:

First Priority:

To ensure the long term social and economic security of Solomon Islands by:

- Protecting the contribution the natural forests make to the living standards of the majority of the nation's population who live in small rural village communities. This concerns primarily the ecological functions of the forest. This priority is considered to be of national strategic importance as the loss of these forest benefits will cause significant poverty, and result in serious public health problems and social disruption.
- Managing the harvesting of the natural forest resources towards a more sustainable level of cut, and in particular protecting long term national sufficiency in wood.

Second Priority:

Where this does not compromise the first priority or future economic forestry options, and where the customary landowners agree, to facilitate commercial use of the natural forests to generate sustainable employment, cash income at the village community level, Government revenue, and foreign exchange earnings.

5. FOREST POLICY AND KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The forest policies and key implementation strategies adopted by the Solomon Island Government are as follows. Some implementation strategies support more than one of the stated forest policies, and are therefore repeated.

FOREST POLICY 1: TO ADOPT A LONG TERM VIEW OF THE FORESTRY SECTOR

Forests, whether natural or planted, take a long time to grow, but can be destroyed or severely damaged within a very short period of time. Loss of forest can result in loss of both the ecological benefits the forests provide, as well as future economic options. Forests, and the benefits they provide to Solomon Islands society, once destroyed, are not easily replaced.

To date the nation's natural forests have been harvested at an unsustainable level. At the 2003 rate of logging the natural forest resource will be exhausted by the year 2010. The logs have already run out in Malaita Province, and are close to running out in a number of other provinces. If a future flow of logs is to be protected, then there is an immediate need to reduce the cut towards a long term sustainable level of production before this economic option ceases to exist.

Key Implementation Strategies:

- a) To protect the ecological functions of the forest by:
 - Excluding high impact uses where these cause unacceptable long term damage to the forests.
 - Applying and enforcing ecologically based standards for commercial scale logging operations.
- b) To manage to current level of harvest towards a more sustainable level.
- c) To support and encourage an invigorated tree planting programme.
- d) To put in place supportive and enabling legislation.

FOREST POLICY 2: TO PROTECT FUTURE ECONOMIC FORESTRY OPTIONS AS A BASIS FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH

Care needs to be taken when natural forests are harvested to protect seedlings and saplings which are the basis for future logging opportunities. Care also needs to be taken to minimise adverse impacts on the ecological benefits the forest provides. The logging practices in the Solomon Islands as at the year 2003 are acknowledged to be poor, and in need of substantial improvement. Continued poor logging practices will destroy the potential of the forest to be harvested again, and negatively impact the ecological benefits relied on by most Solomon Islanders.

As a result of short term logging licences, logging companies do not have a vested interest in protecting the quality of the forest. Improved roading and logging practices must be driven by Government through proper monitoring and control with the benefit of appropriate regulation and penalties.

Key Implementation Strategies:

- a) To apply and enforce ecologically based standards for commercial scale logging operations.
- b) To forbid log harvesting to rise above their current level (550,000 m³/annum), and to review options for reducing this further to a more sustainable level.
- c) To support and encourage an invigorated tree planting programme.

FOREST POLICY 3: TO FACILITATE AND PROMOTE INCREASED LOCAL LEVEL PARTICIPATION IN FORESTRY ADMINISTRATION, HARVESTING AND RESOURCE REPLENISHMENT

Historically the Solomon Islands Government has taken an “exclusive” approach to forestry development. Specifically it has not included the provincial administrations in deliberations regarding which natural forest areas are to be harvested, and it has undertaken plantation development on its own behalf. This approach has limited the opportunity for provincial administrations to coordinate forestry development with other provincial activities. Forestry developments can result in significant social and environmental impacts which need to be taken into account in the provincial development planning process.

The Solomon Islands Government has accepted that plantation development is appropriately left to the private sector, although it recognises that significant disincentives for private sector investment remain. The key disincentive is the lack of secure rights to land. There exists, however, an unsatisfied backlog of customary landowners, who as family groups are seeking assistance to plant trees on their own behalf.

Key Implementation Strategies:

- a) To devolve some forestry responsibilities to the provinces.
- b) To establish an extension function within the Forestry Division tasked primarily with encouraging and supporting family based tree planting.
- c) To provide a legislative framework for eco-forestry projects.

FOREST POLICY 4: TO PROVIDE STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

The long term sustainability of Solomon Islands society, and its standard of living, depends heavily on the protection of the Solomon Island environment against irreparable damage. Today 75% of the nation's population depend significantly on the ecological benefits the forests provide, and the loss of these benefits could be catastrophic. There is also strong justification for banning high impact forest uses such as logging in ecologically and biologically important reserve areas.

Key Implementation Strategies:

- a) To protect the ecological functions of the forest by:

- Excluding high impact uses where these cause unacceptable long term damage to the forests.
 - Applying and enforcing ecologically based standards for commercial scale logging operations.
- b) To observe the international, multilateral and bilateral treaties and commitments signed by the Solomon Island Government.

FOREST POLICY 5: TO LEAVE COMMERCIAL SCALE PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT AND SAWN TIMBER PRODUCTION AS DECISIONS FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO MAKE

It is conventional and understandable thinking for Governments to prefer domestic processing to the export of raw materials in order to achieve “value adding” and local employment. However in the case of the domestic conversion of exportable logs into sawn timber in the Solomon Islands, this is not a supportable policy. Financial and economic analysis shows clearly that the Solomon Island economy gains considerably more economic rent if the log is exported. Economic rent is available to provide landowner returns (stumpage and other benefits) and government income (log export tax).

Key Implementation Strategies:

To formally remove the requirement set out in current logging licences that a portion of the volume harvested must be domestically processed.