

Guest editorial

Sustainable management of the world's forests

For many years there have been significant concerns about the fate of the world's forests, particularly the continued alarming rates of deforestation and illegal logging, but also the ongoing capacity of forests to meet the needs of current and future generations for wood and non-wood forest products. According to FAO, the world has just under 4 billion hectares of forest, covering about 30% of the world's land area. From 1990 to 2005, about 3% of these forests were lost, an average decrease of 0.2% per year, which equates to 7.3 million hectares lost per year.

The underlying issues and solutions to them are complex and differ between countries. There is global agreement, however, that greater effort is needed to achieve sustainable forest management and that developing countries, where many of the forest management problems occur, need significant additional resources to tackle the problems.

If this is such an important problem, why hasn't the international community been able to address it? Has there been any worthwhile progress that might give optimism for an improved outlook for the world's forests? What roles should Australia and Australian foresters play in achieving sustainable management of the world's forests?

There are many reasons why more progress hasn't been made. They include the inability of developed countries to provide adequate resources to assist developing countries implement sustainable forest management; the lack of political commitment; weak forest law enforcement and governance regimes; the desire of countries and landowners to convert forests to other land uses (Figs 1, 2); the influence of the global market for acquiring cheap forest products; the lack of appropriate enabling environments

to encourage private sector investment in sustainable forest management; the lack of empowerment for forest-dependent people; the dependence of rural people on forests for income or subsistence (Figs 3, 4); and the lack of awareness and a system for valuing environmental services of forests.

For the past two decades, there has been ongoing forest policy dialogue at the inter-governmental level, principally through the United Nations. At the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development consensus could not be reached on the need for a Forests Convention, but agreement was reached on the Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of all Types of Forests, also known as the 'Forest Principles'. Between 1995 and 2000, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Forests and the UN Intergovernmental Forum on Forests negotiated over 270 proposals for action to facilitate the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.

In 2000, when the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) was established, there was still no consensus on the 'Forests Convention' issue. Some countries argued that no real progress on sustainable forest management could be made until there was a Forests Convention, while others argued that a greater focus on implementing the existing policy commitments would be far more effective than negotiating another convention. This issue dominated much of the UNFF's agenda for the next five years and contributed to the impression that the global forest community had failed the forests by continuing with 'talk fests' without achieving significant action to improve management of the world's forests.



Figure 1. Extensive new oil palm plantations on former forest land, Jambi Province, Sumatra. Oil palm is the highest-yielding source of bio-diesel fuel. (J.W. Turnbull photo)



Figure 2. Slash-and-burn agriculture, illustrated by this scene in Sumatra, is widely practised in developing countries (J.W. Turnbull photo)



Figure 3. Firewood gathering is a significant cause of deforestation. These collectors, resting in a forest of *Pinus massoniana* near Tam Dao in Vietnam, collected bundles 14 km distant from their base where they sold each bundle for 50 cents US (J.W. Turnbull photo)



Figure 4. Deforestation, mainly for firewood, in Nepal (S.J. Midgley photo)

In April 2007, the UNFF reached agreement on a Non-Legally Binding Instrument on all types of forests. This is a very significant achievement, as for the first time there is international agreement on the commitments that countries need to make to achieve sustainable forest management of the world's forests and to make progress against the four global objectives on forests to which the UNFF agreed in 2006. The new Instrument also articulates a common understanding of sustainable forest management, as a dynamic and evolving concept that aims to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations. The challenge for UNFF over the next decade will be to mobilise resources to enable significant progress to be made against the new commitments.

Australia has the sixth largest area of forest, behind the Russian Federation, Brazil, Canada, the United States of America and China. This gives us a significant moral obligation both to manage our own forests sustainably and to assist other countries to do likewise. Australia has supported a number of very worthwhile forestry projects in Asia and the Pacific through its aid program, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. The most notable and successful project was the Nepal–Australia Forestry Project, which existed in various forms for 40 years. However, there has been a tendency in the last decade for Australia to focus its aid in other sectors, often at the request of the recipient countries, but also because of a preference to focus on short-term projects and a view that previous forestry projects have not achieved long-term results.

Australia should remain active in the global forest policy dialogue to ensure that its significant experience in sustainable forest management influences the development of global policies and programmes. It should increase its forestry aid programme and facilitate greater opportunities for Australian foresters to work with developing country counterparts to improve the management of their forests. Australian foresters have a demonstrated ability to work with the local people to develop forest management strategies that are appropriate to the local situation. There are also significant opportunities for Australian companies to invest in sustainable forest management in developing countries once the appropriate enabling environment has been developed.

The recent announcements by the Australian Government of a new \$200 million Global Initiative on Forests and Climate, as well as of measures to eliminate the import of forest products derived from suspected illegal logging operations, are positive signs of a renewed political commitment for Australia to play its role in enhancing progress with sustainable management of the world's forests.

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