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WHAT IS TIMBER CERTIFICATION, THAT ONE SHOULD BE MINDFUL OF IT?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 30 years global deforestation and the despoiling of the world's forest resources has been a major source of concern. In the fight against the abuse and misuse of the world's forests there have been few conspicuous successes. Where they have occurred the successes tend to be small scale and localized and consequently have not contributed significantly to arresting the decline in the world's forests or improving their management. Independent certification of forests and timber has been promoted as a new and radically different approach to the problem that may offer a better chance of success. It recognizes that forests will be 'utilized' and offers practical guidelines for the management of forest and what should comprise good practice. After a brief description of its origins and history the paper details the aims and objectives of certification and how it will work. It describes the standards and criteria that will be adopted as the basis for certification. It also discusses the dual role of the Forest Stewardship Council: in laying down standards and criteria that are recognized and accepted internationally and as the body responsible for coordinating and overseeing the individual certifying organizations. Finally the paper examines some of the problems and difficulties that certification is likely to face in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years global deforestation and the despoliation of the world's forest resources has been a major source of concern. There is increasing evidence that the abuse of the world's forests is contributing significantly to long term (and possibly irreversible) changes in the climate and environment of the planet.

Considerable resources have been mobilised in the continuing battle to combat the over-exploitation and misuse of forests. Special attention has been paid to the world's tropical forests which have proved particularly vulnerable to the twin pressures of conversion for agriculture and over-exploitation for timber.

In the fight against the misuse of what should be a renewable resource, there have been few conspicuous successes. More importantly the successes tend, generally, to

be small scale and localised and consequently make little impression on the overall problem. In contrast the failures are often very large scale indeed and have a profound impact that is frequently national or even global in scale. The result is that deforestation, globally, is still continuing at the rate of over 15 million ha per year.

The problem is not simply one of deforestation. Just as insidious and worrying is the degradation of the forest due to non-sustainable management practices which lead to species impoverishment, diminishing biodiversity and ultimately to a decline in the ability of the land itself to support forest ecosystems.

It must be acknowledged that at least some of this deforestation is deliberate and planned - the direct consequence of 'development'. The deforestation is part of the price that has to be paid for increasing the area of land under irrigation or productive agriculture. The need for such development is usually backed up by 'incontrovertible' economic data and supported by detailed financial and political justifications. This is not to say that such development is wrong but rather to highlight the enormous pressures to which forests are subjected and which somehow have to be recognised and overcome if forests are to survive.

Take Sri Lanka as an example. Here is an educated and articulate population who have proved themselves to be sensitive to their environment. They are, moreover, politically astute and active. There is also a committed Forest Department, a long history of proven forest practice and a whole raft of supporting environmental and forest legislation.

One would think that if any tropical country could practice good, sustainable and environmentally sensitive management it would be Sri Lanka. But what are the principal concerns expressed for the sector - deforestation and forest and environmental degradation. And deforestation and degradation are continuing to take place in spite of overwhelming evidence about the detrimental impact of these activities on communities and the environment in Sri Lanka.

This is not a criticism of Sri Lanka but it does show how even a nation as well-equipped and well-meaning as Sri Lanka is finding it immensely difficult to resist the forces which ultimately result in deforestation and forest degradation.

INITIATIVES

To counter the problems a number of measures have been put in place, principally over the last two decades.

Bilateral aid from a number of countries has provided resources, funds and technical assistance to national governments that do not have the resources or the technical expertise to tackle the problems by themselves.

Similarly, multilateral support has come from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and various agencies of the UN (in particular the FAO). Support is also coming, increasingly, from the European Union.

A number of specific forestry initiatives have also been put in place - the Tropical Forestry Action Plans (under the auspices of FAO) and the closely related Forestry Master Plans; the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) set up to oversee the International Tropical Timber Agreement; the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which look at environmental problems that are transnational in nature and whose solutions will provide global benefits. These are just some of the activities that are seeking to tackle forestry related problems on an international scale.

Most significantly, in 1992 the United Nations held a Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (UNCED). More popularly known as the Earth Summit or Rio Summit, this was an attempt by the United Nations to get member nations to reach a consensus on reconciling development with the maintenance of the environment.

Almost inevitably results fell far short of expectations and no legally binding commitments were made. What was produced was the:

> non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.

These were in the form of 'Forest Principles' and an agenda (Agenda 21) which set out action programmes for sustainable development into the next century. Agenda 21 comprised a number of chapters each of which addressed a specific issue. Chapter 11 was concerned with Combatting Deforestation and identified four "programme areas" for action:

- Sustaining the multiple roles and functions of all types of forests, forest lands and woodlands.
- Enhancing the protection, sustainable management and conservation of all forests, and the greening of degraded areas, through forest rehabilitation, afforestation and other rehabilitative measures.
- Promoting efficient utilisation and assessment to recover the full valuation of the goods and services provided by forest lands and woodlands.
- Establishing and/or strengthening capacities for planning, assessment and systematic observations of forests and related programmes, projects and activities, including commercial trade and processes.

More succinctly put, better and more sustainable forest management.

A UN commission was established to oversee the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Forest Principles. This was the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD).

Many people, in particular the international NGOs, were disappointed by the lack of real progress and the failure of the western nations in particular, to commit themselves to any immediate and concrete action to arrest environmental and forest decline.

Nevertheless the final declarations, statements and agendas, however hedged with caveats and get out clauses, have been subscribed to by all participating nations. However flawed they may be they still represent the framework within which international forestry will operate, certainly until 1997 (when progress will be reviewed) and probably into the next millennium.
The reason for this long preamble is to highlight the importance placed on improved and sustainable management of the world's forestry resources and how this provides the rationale for forest and timber certification. Though improved and sustainable management has long been recognised as the ultimate objective, the Rio Summit now provides a comprehensive and long term planning framework through which this might be achieved.

Even before the Rio Summit the failure of conventional techniques to arrest the decline in the world's forests had been recognised and there had been a number of attempts to develop alternative mechanisms and approaches to stimulate sustainable development and improved forest management.

Some adopted market based approaches and, recognising that consumers might preferentially select products that came from well managed forests over products from badly managed forests, a new system was developed based on the certification of forests and the labelling of forest products. This system had been developed prior to 1992 but it was the Rio Summit and the international acceptance of the Forest Principles and Agenda 21 that provided the climate which has enabled certification to develop into what it is today.

The system relies on two elements:

- identifying the source of a forest product - the forest from which it originates
- matching the management of that forest to a set of standards and criteria which would indicate whether that forest was being managed 'acceptably' or not.

For forests that were being managed acceptably (or for products that came from them) some sort of mark or stamp of approval was awarded; for forests whose management did not meet 'acceptable' standards (or products whose provenance

could not be proven) some form of commercial or economic sanction was to be applied.

This remains the basis of any certification programme.

Definitions of what were 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' management practices differed from organisation to organisation and person to person, dependent on their particular point of view.

ORGANISATIONS

Various organisations sought to develop and impose their own set of standards and criteria which, if met, would enable their particular certificate to be awarded.

However, with the proliferation of organisations it soon became clear that some unifying set of principles, standards and criteria would need to be established if certification was to bring about the kind of global change envisaged.

In 1993 (one year after the Rio Summit) it was decided to establish an umbrella organisation to help develop a unifying set of standards and principles that could be the basis of any certification programme. This organisation would also be responsible for accrediting other organisations' certification programmes (provided that these programmes met the stringent requirements laid down).

This organisation was called the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and it is currently based in Mexico. It has developed a set of principles which, in effect, define what is internationally accepted as good forest management. These are called, not surprisingly but somewhat unoriginally, the "Principles of Good Forest Management".

Organisations which seek to certify timber and forests to standards which accord with those laid down by the FSC have to seek accreditation from the FSC. This means that the principles and standards on which their own certification programme is based must coincide with (if not match exactly) those of the FSC.

Currently there are a number of organisations which are certifiers of forests and timber and have accreditation from the FSC. In the USA there is the SMARTWOOD Certification Programme run by the Rainforest Alliance. In the UK there are two: a programme run by SGS and the WOODMARK certification programme run, somewhat oddly, by the Soil Association. Interestingly, the WOODMARK programme is about to acquire a director with considerable Sri Lankan experience (the author! Ed.)

A number of other organisations have set up (or are in the process of setting up) their own certification programmes. Some will seek accreditation under the FSC but

others have developed their own certification programmes which are usually product specific or are designed to satisfy specific demands of the market. This involves setting specific standards and criteria which are often too specific to be generally applicable or which are less stringent than those laid down by the FSC.

There have also been attempts to get the International Standards Organisation (ISO) to develop guidelines and criteria for environmental management (ISO 14000). The Canadians have been prime movers in the field - but this initiative has recently received a major setback.

ITTO have produced their own set of Guidelines for Sustainable Management of Natural Tropical Forests (1990). These have recently been augmented. They partially match some of the Principles of Good Forest Management but it is generally accepted that they are less comprehensive and weaker than those put forward by the FSC.

Greenpeace International, the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the European Agency and FAO are just some of the organisations who are actively developing their own specific certification programmes with their own unique sets of principles, standards and definitions.

IMPLICATIONS OF CERTIFICATION FOR SRI LANKA

Having described what certification is, one must now ask why should it matter and in particular why should it matter to Sri Lanka?

At first glance it appears that certification is not an issue that need concern Sri Lanka unduly. Sri Lanka is not a major timber exporter seeking to place its products on an ever competitive international market. This may be true at the moment (though it is possible that in the future she may seek to make better use of the excellent forest resources at her disposal) but this rather misses the point. Certification is simply one of the means by which it is hoped to achieve better and more sustainable management of forest resources and this is precisely the objective that Sri Lanka has recently declared that she is pursuing.

The new forestry policy (which it is believed genuinely reflects public opinion and perceptions) sets clear objectives for achieving better and more sustainable management in Sri Lanka. Indeed some of the policy statements mirror the standards and criteria embodied in the 'Principles of Good Forest Management' - the very principles on which the certification programme is based.

In North America and Europe this desire for better management has been reflected in changes in the market place. Consumers are increasingly demanding that the products they buy come from sustainably managed forests and they need proof of this. It has been argued that this is not a genuinely consumer led revolt but NGO

inspired. This may be true but the nett effect is the same. Products which are not from well managed sources are being actively discriminated against.

Indeed many large retailers, aware of increasing consumer resistance and hostility, are already stipulating that their products must come from well managed sources and come with proof of provenance. This will, in turn, put pressure on importers, merchants and ultimately on the exporting countries to provide products only from well managed sources. This was the logic behind the certification approach and it has already manifested itself and can be expected to continue.

The 1995 Group, for instance, (assisted by the World Wide Fund for Nature) is a group of companies (many of which operate internationally) which have pledged to use only products from proven sustainably managed sources, by the end of 1995. This is matched by a similar initiative sponsored by ITTO which has set a target that all timber should come from well managed forests by the year 2000.

Though these developments are taking place internationally they have significant implications for Sri Lanka and their impact can be expected to be felt increasingly. Contrary to public perception Sri Lanka is still a timber exporter even if the scale is small. For example, masks and small wooden items are still manufactured for the tourist trade from ebony, satin wood and jak. Though small they are high in value and have become internationally recognised as a Sri Lankan product and export item. This is precisely the kind of high value and easily identifiable product that is being targeted by environmentalists. Many of these woods are already listed under CITES and it is inevitable that difficulties will soon be experienced by the wood and carving trade in Sri Lanka in selling and exporting such items. The turtle and tortoise shell industry in Sri Lanka is instructive. A small local Sri Lanka industry has found that it is being strongly (and negatively) affected by International Legislation (CITES) to the point where the export of such items is actively discouraged and is, in fact, illegal.

As Sri Lanka is a co-signatory of CITES it clearly cannot ignore its international obligations. If it tried to maintain the export of woods on the CITES list or from non-sustainable sources then it would be bound to attract criticism and condemnation from environmental organisations, both national and international. It is probable therefore that such items will become impossible to sell without some form of certificate attesting to the sustainable nature of their production.

CONCLUSIONS

It is possible that due to certification the price of many tropical timbers will rise significantly. Higher timber prices may have other implications for the forestry sector of Sri Lanka. The effect on the markets for Sri Lankan teak and mahogany timber could be considerable.

As a timber importer Sri Lanka may also be affected. Precisely what the affect will be is uncertain but it can confidently be assumed that if certification does succeed in its objective then in the short term costs of imported timber may rise as certified timber attracts a premium. Importers could seek to import cheaper non-certified timber but this may also be detrimental to Sri Lanka's international reputation.

As a major recipient of aid Sri Lanka is also uniquely vulnerable. Aid donors have been repeatedly told that their efforts and interventions in tropical forestry have, to a great extent, failed: and certainly globally deforestation and degradation continue unabated. Donors are now responding to these criticisms. With the budgetary belt tightening of the 1990s pressure on funding for aid programmes is increasing. One can anticipate that the amount of funds available for 'conventional' forestry programmes and projects will therefore decline. Additionally donor governments will look for more efficient and cost effective ways of using the funds that are available. Having invested in developing standards and criteria for good and sustainable management (which now have international credibility) it is also inevitable that they will seek to incorporate them into any future programmes of support. Certification is the obvious means of ensuring that the standards and principles of good forest management are adopted and incorporated.

So certification is here, and as it has widespread donor, NGO and commercial support it is likely to become increasingly important in the immediate future: certainly at least until it has been given sufficient time to be tried and tested.

What is important is to recognise that a significant new initiative has appeared on the forestry scene. Precisely what the impact will be on Sri Lanka is uncertain but it behoves us, as foresters, to try and anticipate them.

It is hoped that this paper will have contributed something towards this.