

# Point of view ►

## The trouble with RIL

***Reduced impact logging is a requirement of sustainable forest management, but it falls well short of being the complete answer***

by Alf Leslie

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THESE IS, I suspect, a widespread feeling that reduced impact logging (RIL) represents a major, even the decisive, advance needed towards sustainable forest management in the tropics.

The truth, unfortunately, is that it does not and it does not because, for a start, we have not yet worked out anything more than a rudimentary understanding of where RIL fits in with sustainable forest management. We know that RIL must be part of it, which would be a good start if we only knew what sustainable forest management really was—but that we do not.

A recent, critical review of sustainable forest management concluded that it is “an incomprehensible blur” (Sheehan 2000). In logic if not timing, sustainable forest management is the application to forests of sustainable development, which became the norm for resource use accepted by the world community as an outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992—“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. For the most part, definitions of sustainable forest management contain similar vague and comforting terms—an inevitable outcome of the process by which sustainable forest management has been and still is being formulated. Talking about an issue is much easier and more comfortable than trying to do something about it. Those who get enjoyment from such a process have a vested interest in keeping it going. Hence the “interminable international chanting of conferences, papers, reports, books, websites, seminars, symposiums ... etc” on the issue found by Sheehan.

There is no doubt that RIL will be an improvement on the damage done and the mess left by the logging practices which are almost standard in tropical forests and still fairly common in temperate forests. But it will not automatically bring about sustainable forest management. One of the troubles with RIL, therefore, is that it is a necessary condition for sustainable forest management but not a sufficient one. In fact, it is a long way from being a sufficient condition.

Although we don't yet have an operational

definition of sustainable forest management we can identify a few things that must be included in it. The first is that sustained yield timber production is an essential requirement, implicit in the ‘development’ part of sustainable development. Since forest-based development depends on the industrial use of forest resources, timber harvesting is an unavoidable component of sustainable forest management. But it must be a very tightly constrained sort of timber harvesting. It must conform to at least three conditions:

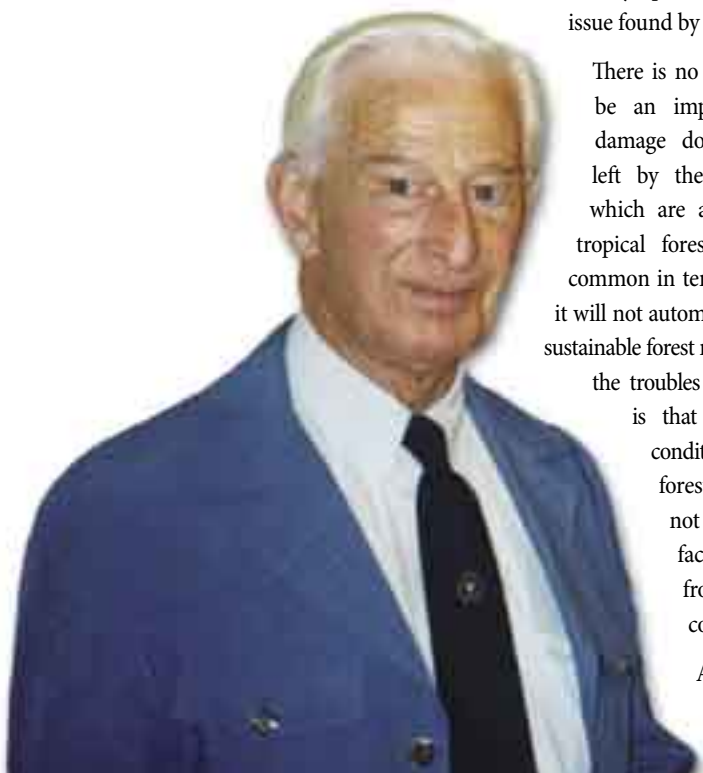
- there is no long-term disturbance to the stability and dynamics of the forest ecosystem;
- there is no permanent irreversible damage to the environment on which that ecosystem depends or to the environments and societies which depend on the forest ecosystem; and
- it must not hinder and, preferably, should assist regeneration of the harvested parts of the forest in a form that maintains ecosystem integrity.

These conditions set the degree of impact reduction that must be achieved, not the amount of damage or disruption that may be tolerated. The latter—damage tolerance—seems to be the side from which RIL has generally been approached. It is wrong. To come at it from the other end leads us to see that sustainable forest management requires greatly reduced impact logging; in effect, almost zero-impact logging. Thus, another trouble with RIL as presently conceived is that the degree of impact reduction is rarely specified and certainly never to such a drastic level as the virtual elimination of adverse impacts. Yet, like it or not, that is the level of impact required for the strict interpretation of sustainable forest management.

To many, such a requirement must seem the ultimate in impracticability. That may well be so, but it doesn't mean that it cannot be done. Manual logging, helicopter logging, advanced cable logging and animal logging systems can all come very close to zero impact. The real objection is not technical but economic.

This brings me to the problem I see as contributing most to the trouble with RIL. This is the industry-wide problem of the economic implications of RIL as an element of sustainable forest management. It is hard to see that RIL—at the near-zero impact necessary—will not add to the cost of timber production, but even if it does not, as some studies suggest, it is inevitable that the wider requirements of sustainable forest management will. For a start, near-zero impact will require a reduction in harvesting volume. Moreover, the sustainable management of natural forests requires, by definition, the maintenance of natural forests in the long term. At the moment, this is not a profitable land use. Current prices for commodity-grade timbers are already low and will be kept

Photo: J. Graham



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## **Brazil's ambitious forest program**

The Brazilian Ministry of Environment recently published the country's National Forest Program. This document describes the context within which the Program was developed, its objectives, its justification, its key areas of development or 'thematic lines', and a strategy for its implementation. The thematic lines are: expansion of the planted forest resource; expansion and consolidation of native forest management in public areas; management of native forests in private areas; monitoring and control; traditional and indigenous populations; forest education, science and technology; forest environmental services; institutional strengthening and forest extension; modernisation of forest-based industries; and the marketing and trade of forest products.

The cost of this ambitious program is not given in the document. However, possible funding sources are described: the potential pool of financial resources is estimated at US\$359 million per year. Of this, US\$100 million is forecast to come from non-government organisations and social movements, and US\$10 million from international cooperation grants such as those provided by ITTO.

*Copies of the program in Portuguese or English can be ordered from: Ministério do Meio Ambiente—MMA, Centro de Informação e Documentação Luís Eduardo Magalhães—CID Ambiental, Esplanada dos Ministérios—Bloco 'B'—Térreo, 70068–900—Brasília—DF, Brazil; Tel 55–61–317 1235; Fax 55–61–224 5222; cid@mma.gov.br*

## **Indonesia issues first sustainable forest certificate**

The Indonesian Ecolabelling Institute (LEI) awarded a certificate of good forest management last April to PT Diamond Raya Timber, a company based in Riau Province in central Sumatra, according to *The Jakarta Post*. PT Diamond owns a 91 000-hectare concession in the area and was granted the certificate after an audit conducted by SGS Qualifor, a company accredited by both LEI and the Forest Stewardship Council. LEI Executive Director Dradjad Wibowo said that four more forest concessionaires representing a further 812 000 hectares of forest were being audited for possible certification. Three other timber companies have been dropped from the auditing list for their inability to meet certification standards.

## **PNG establishes ITTO group**

The recently formed Papua New Guinea (PNG) ITTO Committee held its inaugural meeting at the PNG National Forest Service headquarters in Port Moresby last March. The committee is made up of representatives of the PNG National Forest Service, the Office of Environment and Conservation, the PNG University of Technology, the University of Papua New Guinea, the PNG Forest Research Institute, the PNG Eco-forestry Forum, PNG Forest Industries, and the Association of Foresters of PNG. One of the main tasks assigned to the committee is to screen ITTO project proposals before they are submitted for approval to the ITTO Expert Panel for the Technical Appraisal of Project Proposals.

*Reported by Clement Victor, Lae, April 2001*

## **Cameroon suspends logging by 32 companies**

The Government of Cameroon ordered 32 logging companies to suspend their activities because they had failed to pay taxes amounting to US\$4.1 million, according to press reports. The Minister for the Environment and Forestry, Mr Syvestre Naah Ondoua, said that the 32 companies were no longer authorised to fell, transport and export wood from their concessions. He said that the companies should be fined for breaking the law, and that logging would not be permitted to resume until the taxes were paid. He also said that logging activities are to be monitored by the forestry administration and an 'international observer body' in order to add transparency to the activities of timber companies.

*Reported by Parfait Mimbimi Esono, Yaoundé, May 2001*

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low by the deluge of commodity-grade timbers soon to arrive from the global plantation estate. How, then, will forest owners capture the rent they need to justify keeping natural forest as natural forest? RIL is a good start, because it will mean that the forest will be more productive—and capable of supporting a second harvest sooner—than it would be if logged in the currently standard way. But it won't be enough.

It is painfully obvious that sustainable forest management means, as Chris Maser put it more than ten years ago, that "we must change our way of thinking and to change our way of thinking we must transcend our special interests". RIL is a start in that direction but it is not much more than a first, almost hesitant step; the troubles with RIL show that we have a long, long

way to go. Foresters can help accelerate progress along the track but only if we shake off our predilection for "change without a major upheaval in the affected industries", which some adherents have suggested RIL can bring. That is impossible: major upheaval is coming and sustainable forest management is but one of the factors that will bring it about. It is, however, the one factor over which we can exercise some control. So let's stop fantasising about change without upheaval, substitute doing for talking about RIL, and start applying very greatly reduced impact logging with a sense of urgency.

## **Reference**

Sheehan, P. 2000. Gottstein Trust report 'Enculturation of sustainable forest management systems: learning from the Canadian experience.' *Appita journal* 53(2).