

ITTO Tropical Forest

UPDATE

A newsletter from the International Tropical Timber Organization to promote the conservation and sustainable development of tropical forests

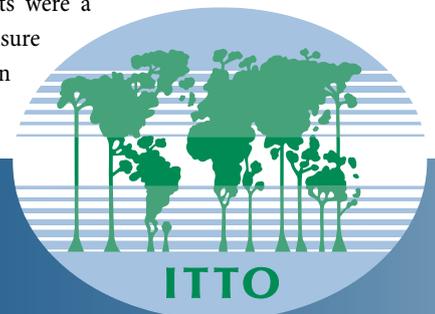


Strengthening diversity

ELEVEN YEARS AGO an article published in *Scientific American* sent shock waves through the tropical forestry community. Entitled *Can Sustainable Management Save Tropical Forests?*, the article made a compelling case for the failure of sustainable forest management (SFM) in the tropics, primarily in terms of its inability to (up to that point in time) safeguard tropical forests' immense biodiversity. The authors of the paper concluded that the efforts by many countries and organizations (including ITTO) to promote SFM and associated measures like reduced impact logging (RIL) had essentially been a waste of time and money, proposing instead

that a system of protected area 'set asides' be established in inaccessible or uneconomic areas outside commercial logging concessions.

A decade later another article in the prestigious journal *Nature* entitled *A Logged Forest in Borneo is Better than No Forest at All*² argued that in the face of increased threats to tropical forests from plantation crops like oil palm, properly logged forests were a key element in helping to ensure biodiversity conservation in the tropics.



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Cover image Jaguar (*Panthera onca*) patrolling a forest road in Iwokrama, Guyana. Photo: Fotonatura

It will be no secret to regular readers of the *TFU* what side of this argument ITTO is on. In fact it is probably misleading to imply that there is still any argument over the issue. Virtually all observers now agree that SFM can, when properly implemented, play a key role in helping to conserve non-timber forest values, including biodiversity. The key phrase, though, is “properly implemented”. This has always been the weak link in tropical forestry and remains so today. It is why ITTO and others have dedicated significant resources to promoting SFM and training tropical foresters how to apply the principles and practices that help to maintain healthy and vital forests.

A key contribution of ITTO has been its policy development program, through which a series of guidelines have been formulated to provide developing countries (some of which had no forest management at all let alone sustainable management up until a decade or two ago) with a framework for introducing sustainability into their forest sectors. This issue of *TFU* summarizes a complete revision of one of ITTO’s earliest efforts under this program, the *Guidelines on the Conservation of Biodiversity in Tropical Production Forests* (p. 3). Soon to be jointly published with partners the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the new Guidelines will provide an essential reference to countries trying to balance the twin goals of forest-based development and conservation, sending the key message that timber harvesting when done well is part of the solution to conserving tropical forest biodiversity.

As with its other policy initiatives, ITTO will make resources available to assist countries to implement the new Guidelines. This will include training workshops and other activities to be carried out with IUCN, as well as continuing to promote biodiversity-friendly harvesting techniques like RIL. Several studies of forests harvested under RIL regimes are now available (e.g. p. 7) and virtually all show the beneficial effects of RIL on biodiversity and other forest values when compared to conventional logging, with some values being comparable to or exceeding those of pristine forests.

Perhaps the most important components of forest biodiversity to be considered

when developing management plans are the people living in and around the forest. Plans to strengthen and sustain forest biodiversity are doomed to failure unless the human element is taken into account. As illustrated by one ITTO activity in Congo (p. 13), local communities can relatively quickly make the transition from exploiting to protecting wildlife and other biodiversity, although careful management of expanding wildlife populations can be required to minimize conflicts with local populations.

While there is no doubt that the establishment and management of protected areas will remain a key component of biodiversity conservation strategies in tropical countries (as evidenced by ITTO’s large and expanding program to establish and manage transboundary conservation reserves and other protected areas), it is equally certain that large areas (usually the majority) of forests in most countries will be earmarked for development and forest management. While new funding which may become available for tropical forest protection through on-going climate change negotiations or other sources may alter this equation in some countries, at the pan-tropical level it is unlikely to change dramatically any time soon. ITTO will therefore continue working with its partners to ensure that forest-based development in tropical countries is sustainable, thereby strengthening the diversity on which the future of their forests depends.

Steve Johnson

¹Rice, R.E., Gullison, R.E. and Reid, J.W. 1997. *Can sustainable management save tropical forests?* Scientific American 276: 44-49.

²Meijaard, E. and Sheil, D. 2007. *A logged forest in Borneo is better than none at all.* Nature 446: 974.