

Status of forest management in Myanmar

Myanmarese forestry must meet a number of challenges if it is to retain its reputation for excellence*

MYANMAR'S natural forests are still the country's primary source of forest products, providing teak and other hardwood timber and performing valuable protective services. The important forest types are: mixed deciduous forest, including teak (38% of the total forest area of about 34.4 million hectares); hill and mountable evergreen forest (26%); tropical evergreen forest (16%); dry forest (10%); deciduous dipterocarp forest (5%); and tidal swamp forest (4%). Forests are owned by the State and are categorised legally as reserved forests (30%) and public forest or unclassified forests (70%).

Permanent forest estate: of the total forest area, 13 million hectares (37.8% of the total forest area and 19% of the country's land area) are categorised as permanent forest estate (PFE), of which 3.3 million hectares are in designated conservation reserves. It is claimed that 62.2% of the boundary of the PFE has been demarcated. Within the PFE, 9.7 million hectares are designated as production forest, comprising 8.3 million hectares of mixed deciduous and 1.4 million hectares of evergreen forests. The natural forests are managed under the Myanmar Selection System, which is described by Saw Eh Dah on page 12. The Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE), a state-owned company, is responsible for the harvesting of both teak and other hardwoods. It operates 38 extraction and rafting agencies throughout the country.

The dragging of logs is done mainly by elephants and, to a lesser extent, water buffalo. The use of animals in log extraction has a low impact on the environment and biodiversity, and wastage is low compared to mechanical logging. The MTE has about 3000 elephants and hires an additional 2000 from private owners for timber extraction. Heavy machinery is used mainly for road construction, the loading and unloading of logs, and transportation.

In addition to logging carried out by MTE under the supervision of the Forestry Department, the State Peace and Development Council and State Law and Order Restoration Council (SPDC/SLORC) have granted logging concessions as part of ceasefire deals in some border regions.

Logging plans: it is reported that the area covered annually for wood harvest is about 411 000 hectares. Logging activities are guided by the National Code of Forest Harvesting Practices, which gives detailed guidelines for activities such as the alignment and construction of extraction roads, skid trails and stream crossings; the marking of tree position on maps; climber-cutting before felling; and the directional felling of selectively marked trees.

Institutional arrangements

Forest laws and rules: the Burma Forest Act 1902 and subsequent amendments were in use until SLORC promulgated new forest legislation in November 1992. The important instruments for implementing the Myanmar Forest Policy 1995 are:

- Forest Law (1992);
- Forest Rules (1995);
- Protection of Wildlife and Wild Plants and Conservation of Natural Areas Law (1994);
- Community Forestry Instructions (1995);
- Myanmar Agenda 21 together with Environmental Policy;
- National Forestry Action Plan (1995);
- Criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management (1999);
- Format and guidelines for district forest management plans (1996);
- National Code of Practice for Forest Harvesting; and
- National Framework for Environmental Law.

The 1992 forest law emphasises the importance of people's awareness and participation in the conservation and sustainable utilisation of forest resources. It also stresses the importance of collecting and updating resource information, planning, the continuous monitoring of all forest operations, and maintaining the ecological balance and environmental stability.

Organisation for policy implementation: the Ministry of Forestry has the primary responsibility for the administration and management of the forestry sector. The organisational structure comprises a combination of government agencies (such as the Planning and Statistics Department, the Forest Department, MTE, the Dryzone Greening Department and the National Commission on Environment Affairs), government-sponsored non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Forest Resource, Environment, Development and Conservation Association, and private bodies such as the Timber Merchants Association.

The initial adoption of a market economy in the country was announced in September 1988 and, as a result, many private timber companies became involved in timber industries. However, MTE retains a monopoly on the harvesting, processing and export of teak and the private sector is not allowed to export logs of any species. With a view to stepping up the manufacturing of forest products and to promote internal and external distribution, a Forest Products Joint Venture Corporation has been established jointly by MTE, the Forest Department and private enterprises.

Criteria and indicators: Myanmar adopted a set of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management in 1999. It comprises seven criteria, 76 indicators and 257 activities at the national level and seven criteria, 73 indicators and 217 activities at the forest management unit level.

Civil society involvement: the participation of civil society in Myanmarese forestry takes place through government-sponsored NGOs such as those noted above. Others, such as

farmers' and women's income-generation groups (FIGGs), are being formed. The FIGG initiative aims to raise off-farm incomes and help sustainable forest management with a positive effect on social well-being. Some 38 million people are dependent on forests in Myanmar, for whose benefit an area of 6 749 000 hectares of local-supply working circle has been set aside. About 260 agreements between social groups and the Forest Department are in force.

Resource mobilisation: fund mobilisation for forestry development is mainly a government responsibility. Despite the existence of a long-term national forest action plan (1995) and district forest management plans, resource planning for program implementation has not gone well. Little foreign assistance is available: overseas development assistance for Myanmar was recently estimated to be about us\$1 per capita, compared to us\$35 per capita for Cambodia and us\$68 for Laos.

Status

Myanmar has long enjoyed a reputation for good forest management, particularly in its teak forests. Planned management for timber production dates back about 150 years and the continued productivity of its forests is testament to its quality. However, there are signs that sustainability is under threat from a number of sources and significant parts of the country's forest resources are in a critical and degraded condition. Issues that need to be addressed include:

- timber extraction is concentrated on only a few species, particularly teak. The 'creaming' of the forest, if not abated, might lead to the devaluation of the forests in the long run through a decrease in valuable species. There is limited knowledge on how to market lesser used species and not much is done to promote non-wood products and the non-timber benefits of forests;
- forest management and forest health are further affected by illegal logging and poaching, particularly in border forests, and by encroachment for agriculture and infrastructure development. An estimated 5.2 million hectares of forest were cleared in the 1990s (FAO 2001); and
- the Forest Department is working to conserve the natural forests in the PFE, including through inventories, surveys, boundary demarcation, fire protection, logging codes, forest reservation, the establishment of the PFE, and increased community involvement. However, the effectiveness of these interventions is limited due to, among other things, chronic budget shortages in the Department, very limited private-sector and civil-society involvement, an insufficient and inadequate manpower resource, existence of illegal activities, and inefficient utilisation.

Border areas: Global Witness (2004) cites considerable conflicts in natural resource management in Myanmar,

particularly in border areas. These include: serious misuse/abuse in logging activities; uncontrolled logging in Kachin state and the cross-border movement of logs into China; in Karen state, the cross-border movement of logs into Thailand; and the unsustainable and destructive activities of logging companies operating in ceasefire areas. The management of forests by insurgent groups has been poor or non-existent and much of the resource has already disappeared.

Part of the problem in border areas arises from cross-border demand. The Government of Thailand imposed a ban on logging in 1989, which increased demand for timber produced in the border areas of Myanmar. Likewise, the demand for forest products in southern China is also increasing the harvesting of forests in northern Myanmar. This increased demand, if not matched by enhanced forest law enforcement, will cause the further degradation of timber resources in Myanmar and threaten the conservation of biodiversity, suggesting the need for a joint border conservation program.

Sources

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