



STRIKING A BALANCE TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SARAWAK'S TIMBER INDUSTRY

The timber industry has been under immense criticism and attack in recent years, helped no less by the well-funded non-government organisations whose only aim seems to be the cessation of all forms of timber cultivation in developing countries.

Through well-organized campaigns that seek to strike at the conservation heartstrings of the public, these NGOs have managed to build up images of amoral timber companies who enter every inch of virgin forest to 'de-forest' the land for their own enrichment.

If the land also happens to be foraging land for native communities – as is the case in Sarawak – then the modus operandi is to use images of weary indigenous peoples fighting a lopsided and unending battle with Timber Barons.

It is all very romantic and can spur the tender hearted to leave all their comforts behind and head into the virgin forests of Sarawak to fight for the natives there, believing always that what would greet them would be barren streaks of denuded forests and polluted rivers.

Reality however, has a very cruel way of pouring cold water on the romantic dreams of the idealistic eco-warriors. The image that these NGOs would have the world believe – that of tractors ploughing indiscriminately through pristine virgin forests while timber barons wring their hands in glee – is far from the truth.

The government authorities that deal with the timber industry should be given their due credit and recognition for putting in place stringent conditions and restrictions to regulate the felling of any trees from areas which have been licenced for harvesting.

Recently, Samling was accused of encroaching on Penan native customary rights or NCR land and of felling timber from "primeval forest" in the Upper Baram area. We were accused again of trampling over Penan villagers' rights by carrying out felling operations without the consent of village leaders.

For anyone without knowledge of the process that governs the felling of trees in licenced areas, such reports would surely be ultimate proof of the destruction that is wrought by timber companies, and the impunity with which companies trample on the rights of the indigenous peoples.

But the truth is that such accusations made by various NGOs, work hard to keep the facts from their readers, providing them only with a version of events that suit their own agenda. The reality on the ground tells a very different tale with restrictions on what can be felled, when it can be felled and how it should be felled.

In order to harvest trees in the Sarawak Permanent Forest Estate, and under the forest timber licence conditions imposed by the Forest Department of Sarawak (FDS), the licensee is required



to apply for a PEC or Permit to Enter Coupe and upon its issuance, practice the selective felling system which aims to fell mature and over-mature trees without denuding the forest.

While mature and over-mature trees are felled from licensed areas, FDS regulations require that this is done in such a way so as to leave behind residual stands with sufficient number of trees in the intermediate diameter classes to form the next crop of trees.

In other words, the felling is extremely selective and areas are not cleared and left barren. This is to ensure sustainable residual tree crop in the next round of harvesting.

As is stated in the FDS website: “The system has been designed to safeguard the environment and takes advantage of the timber market demand. In harvesting the mature and over-mature trees, sustainability of the forests is assured.”

In other words, the system is designed to ensure that the dual aims of sustaining the timber industry and preserving the environment, are met.

Admittedly, some damage will occur from the tree felling as well the construction of transport infrastructure, which could also lead to a degree of sedimentation and erosion. But these effects are temporary in nature and great effort is taken to provide the right conditions for vegetation to regrow and protect the damaged areas.

When a PEC is issued for harvesting trees, the licensee is required to follow a sequence of operational activities that must take place under Operations 1-4 before any felling can begin under Operations 5.

Again, the FDS website lists this sequence as follows:

Sequence of Operational Activities in the Annual Coupe System

| Forest Type | Sequence of Operations | Operational Activities |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| H MDF | 1 | Cut, demarcate and survey coupe boundaries. |
| | 2 | Prepare topographical work map. |
| | 3 | Align and survey of proposed road on the ground. |
| | 4 | Start road construction as planned in the approved map; demarcate and survey logging block boundaries and carry out tree enumeration. |
| | 5 | Fell and extract timber from approved blocks. |

What all this indicates is that a PEC does not mean the immediate and arbitrary felling of trees by timber companies. This is simply impossible because it is not how the system works. Accusations that felling begins as soon as timber companies are awarded PECs are essentially untruths.



Aside from the environment safeguards, the authorities also impose strict conditions to ensure that harvesting does not take place in hill forests on steep slopes with gradients of 35 degrees and above as well as in forests in water catchment areas.

Areas that have been identified and certified by the Land and Survey Department of Sarawak as NCR land are excised from the forest timber licences. Disputes over the classification of NCR land continue simply because the issue is a very complex one with a history dating back for decades.

*It is worth noting however that the Deputy Chief Minister of Sarawak had announced recently that over 1.005 million hectares of NCR land have been surveyed under a new initiative that began in 2010, of which over 778,000 hectares has been gazetted.

Datuk Amar Awang Tengah Ali Hassan said the initiative ensured that a much larger area of NCR lands is undergoing survey as compared to the last exercise that began in the 1960s and ran for some 50 years.

“In the preceding 50 years since 1960, the output using the old survey method was not encouraging – only about 260,000 hectares (642,460 acres) of NCR land had been surveyed.

“This meant that on average, only 5,200 hectares of NCR land were measured per year, despite the demand to measure NCR land being so high.

“That’s why the state government introduced the new initiative in 2010. This programme is being done in two stages – the first being the perimeter survey and gazettment under Section 6 of Sarawak Land Code as Bumiputera Communal Reserve (Agriculture); and the second stage involving measurements of individual lots and the issuance of land ownership under Section 18 of the same code,” he said.

It is also important to note that the survey is being carried out with the consent of the land claimants and if these claimants do not wish for their land to undergo perimeter survey, the works will not be carried out. The same condition applies to lands which are still in dispute and under trial in the courts.

The point here is that the timber industry in Sarawak, similar to timber industries the world over (that follow Sustainable Forest Management Guidelines or Certification processes), are subject to stringent conditions and restrictions simply because every party concerned is acutely aware of how important it is to ensure the sustainability of our forests. The forests are the lifeline of the timber industry; to destroy the forests is to destroy the future of the timber industry.

For years, the timber industry in Sarawak has provided jobs for thousands of locals including native communities. Expansion into downstream activities has also resulted in better skills training for local communities and greater financial security.

To demand developing countries to cease all forms of harvesting is akin to killing the timber industry in these countries. What then happens to the thousands of individuals who rely on the timber industry for their livelihood?



Sarawak is in the process of establishing industrial tree plantations or ITPs that will eventually be the source of all raw materials for the timber industry. And while ITPs will replace a small proportion of forests, establishing such managed forests is a key step in ensuring that further deforestation is reduced to a minimum.

Such an approach has been endorsed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, which has also called for a “realistic balance” to be struck between conservation goals and local needs and demands for resources.

“The conservation and sustainable management of forests within an integrated landscape approach is key to the conservation of the world’s biodiversity and to food security and well-being of the world’s people. A realistic balance between conservation goals and local needs and demands for resources that support livelihoods and well-being must be struck. This requires effective governance; integrated policies for interrelated issues; land-tenure security; respect for the rights and knowledge of local communities and indigenous peoples; and enhanced capacity for monitoring of biodiversity outcomes. It also requires innovative financing modalities.”

A realistic outlook is key here; idealistic or romantic notions do not lead to sustainable solutions. The livelihood of a wide range of communities is at stake. To view the issue through the blinkered lenses of NGOs and to take the narrowest and most extreme path will not provide jobs or put food on tables.

Ends

* Reference: [‘Over a million hectares of NCR land in Sarawak surveyed under new initiative since 2010’ \(theborneopost.com\)](http://theborneopost.com)