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Logging and Tropical Forest Conservation

Introduction:

In 1985 the World Bank and other organizations launched the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, a grand scale initiative to establish sustainable forest management (SFM) in every country in the tropics. The idea was that well thought out plans for sustainable forest use would cause less destruction and protect biological diversity better than conventional logging. However in 1991 the Bank recognized the program was a failure, in some cases it had made matters worse; it withdrew support for the TFAP and instituted a policy of no new loans for tropical logging.

In 1990 the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) adopted an objective to bring all tropical timber operations to sustainable levels by the year 2000. Despite massive spending to support this goal, almost no logging outside plantations in the tropics is sustainable.

Several problems stand in the way of broader adoption of SFM, the most important being that it is less profitable than conventional timber extraction. There is also very little technical knowledge about how to manage tropical forests sustainably, including but not limited to: how trees respond to harvests, their

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growth rates, their habitat requirements, their pollinators and seed dispersers — the list could be a long one.

In spite of expensive failures and almost total ignorance about how to do it, SFM remains a popular goal in the conservation and development communities, the idea of timber certification being a recent example. In the case of timber certification, independent oversight ensures that timber is produced from

sustainably managed operations. Such an operation in Papua, New Guinea, was described by Gordon Orians in the September 1998 issue of this newsletter. In practice, although the main idea is to protect forest structure and biological diversity by making the living forest a thing of value to the stakeholders, wood production can easily dominate on-the-ground efforts.

Currently the Bank is considering lifting its ban on tropical logging in yet another attempt to find a workable approach to SFM. Many conservationists are urging the Bank not to change its policy. We spoke with Dr. Richard Rice of Conservation International about problems inherent in sustainable timber production in the tropics.

ER: Dr. Rice, what is your training?

RR: As an undergraduate, I majored in economics at Grinnell College, a small liberal arts school in Iowa, and later got a Ph.D. in Natural Resource Economics from the School of Natural Resources at the University of Michigan. Apart from economics I've always had an interest in biology. When I was an undergraduate, for example, I studied sea turtle feeding habits in Costa Rica, and as a graduate student I studied tropical ecology with the Organization for Tropical Studies also in Costa Rica. Over the years I've also been lucky enough to tag along on expeditions

