

Proceedings of the Conference on “Forest Resources Crisis in the Third World” 6-8 September 1986. Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 1987. 510 pp. Overseas price including postage US\$ 18.00.¹

This book is an impressive product of a conference on forest problems of tropical underdeveloped countries sponsored by Sahabat Alam (Friends of the Earth) Malaysia (SAM). It brought together persons from 22 nations, mostly representatives of activist NGOs. There are 36 main contributions in the book plus several appendices and they are, by and large, frank and unrestrained in assigning major blame for the Third World Crisis in Forestry: short-sighted government policies of promoting economic growth with quick foreign exchange earnings, the exploitative colonial mentality of industrialized (First World) nations and the elites of Third World countries, and “development” policies of international agencies such as FAO, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc. which tend to promote the economic interests of industrialized nations. The poor farmers and native ethnic minorities of Third World nations are the victims rather than the perpetrators of the process of forest destruction. Virtually all forest exploitation programs, including “reforestation” schemes, basically enable rich nations to obtain cheap raw materials while not paying for any of the adverse long-term ecological, social or economic consequences in the producer countries.

The reader, regardless of his political leanings, cannot fail to see the plain truth of most of these assertions, which are repeated for country after country. The environmentalists do not push any particular political or ideological themes; they simply are looking at what is happening around them and are not timid about speaking out about it, as are resource experts in FAO, Third World governments and most international agencies. Generally, they do not try to identify good guys or bad guys except to deplore greed and corruption.

The book begins with opening addresses by the President of SAM, S.M. Mohd. Idris, J.P., and the Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment of Malaysia, Y.B. Datuk Amar Stephen K.T. Yong, who admits that forest loss has had numerous serious consequences and urges SAM and other NGOs to come forth and cooperate with the government to improve the environment.

The book is divided into eight sections: I, Forest Resources Crisis – an Overview; II, Forest Resources and Timber Exploitation; III, Ecological Effects of Forest Destruction; IV, Forest Destruction and its Impact on Tribals and People; V, The Role of TNCs (Trans-national corporations) and First World Governments in Forest Destruction; VI, The Role of Development Aid Agencies, Financial Institutions and U.N. Agencies in Forest Destruction; VII, NGO Forest Network and Action in the First World; and VIII, NGO Forest Network and Action in the Third World.

In the first section, Khor Kok Peng of Malaysia provides an excellent summary

¹ order from: Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 43 Salween Road, 10050 Penang, Malaysia.

of the magnitude of the forestry crisis, its effects, and its basic causes. He lays it on the line: tropical forest depletion represents a transfer of wealth and resources from the Third World to wealthy First World nations, and represents environmentally destructive, nonsustainable exploitation. Third World governments are too obsessed with the "growth syndrome" and the GNP at the expense of sustainability and equitable distribution of resources. The author also blames academic sciences and economics for ignoring most of the social, economic and political implications of forest destruction. A short summary of UNEP's activities in forest conservation by M. Ohta ends this section. UNEP seems to have been the only international aid agency represented at the conference.

The second section contains presentations documenting corrupt practices and misuse of forests in Bangladesh, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Thailand. The chapter by H. Ngao et al. (SAM) describes how national development policies have misused forest resources for the benefit of politicians and the wealthy in Malaysia. Timber has been a major income earner there, and with exploitation of peninsular forests reaching a limit, forests in Sabah and Sarawak have been opened up to commercial plundering, to the tragic detriment of native forest peoples in these areas. The author describes how official land codes and state agencies deprive the Penans and other native people of their rights to the resources they have used from antiquity, and their ability to continue their traditional lifestyles. Their complaints are treated in a most callous and cavalier manner by timber companies almost as though they were mere animals of the forest.

D.J. Ganapin, Jr., describes the effects of Philippine government-promoted deforestation on the loss of biological diversity, and the increase in poverty of the indigenous cultures and the disadvantaged in general. H. Jhamtani and E. Hafild document the problems faced in Indonesia, but lay more of the blame at the feet of donor and consumer countries for failing to support long-term and sustainable methods of exploitation.

S.M. Saulei describes the forest resource development crisis in Papua New Guinea; PNG is fortunate in retaining a high percentage of forest cover. The recognition of tribal or clan land ownership rights has retarded the rapid commercial exploitation that is seen in other countries. However, land owners can still sell their timber rights to the government, which will carry out forestry or development schemes, or to an outside private enterprise. In fact, most of the large forest exploitation developments are foreign owned, most by Japanese, British or European agencies. Much land abuse is occurring and the PNG Forest Department tends to promote conventional style development projects rather than those with ecologically sound sustainable exploitation.

The chapter on Thailand, by Thavivongse Sriburi (Siam Environment Club) thoroughly covers physical geography, climate, forest resources, uplanders (hill tribes), and (in appendices) includes descriptions of all forest types and legislation dealing with forestry and conservation. There are tables containing yearly trade statistics. There is little in-depth analysis of the social, economic or political issues at the root of

Thai forestry problems, however. In fact, I have yet to encounter such an analysis anywhere; Thai experts always just take the social, political and legal setting for granted. It is this setting, in my opinion, that dooms all efforts to stop deforestation in Thailand to failure. A lot could be said about the reasons for failure to stop deforestation here, but this chapter mainly just presents facts that are available elsewhere.

The ecological effects detailed in Section III include climatic effects (by V.M. Meher-Homji), desertification (D. Stiles), drought and desertification (N.D. Jayal, V. Shiva et al.) and transmigration schemes in Indonesia (M. Colchester).

Section IV, which concerns the plight of shifting cultivators and indigenous groups, was the most interesting for me and highlights the book's concern with the social and cultural aspects of deforestation. D.J. Ganapin, Jr., details the consistent dispossession of tribal people of their land in the Philippines and the ignoring of the land needs of the poor in most development projects. E. Hong, writing on forest destruction and the plight of Sarawak's natives, presents a shocking picture of destruction of native ancestral lands by timber companies owned by wealthy politicians and other businessmen. J. Pathy (India) argues that shifting cultivators are wrongly blamed for forest destruction, which did not begin in earnest until the colonial system resulted in dispossession of the poor of their lands and the industrial use of timber resources. There are now about 850,000 tribal families which practise shifting cultivation in India, which need to be integrated into forestry somehow and helped with new types of forest crops.

S.C. Chin (Malaysia) argues that shifting cultivation should not be considered to be a form of forest destruction, as FAO defines it, but represents a form of sustained use of the ecosystem. Urbanization and rural poverty are the major, if indirect, causes of forest destruction.

In Section V, statistics are marshalled to support the view that European TNCs and governments, Japan's timber trade, and large hydroelectric projects are major causes of deforestation in the Third World. In Section VI, J. Bandyopadhyay and V. Shiva present a critical review of "Tropical Forests – a Call for Action", a position paper published by the World Resources Institute for the World Bank and UNDP, which advocates projects which replace natural forests with eucalyptus and pine plantations to produce pulpwood. These benefit primarily industrial interests and not local indigenous peoples, and eliminate natural ecosystems. The WRI position does not fully appreciate the social and ecological problems facing tropical forestry and tends to promote a temperate zone forester's view which sees forests as simply monocultures managed for commercial wood production.

Further chapters take to task policies of the World Bank, Overseas Development Bank, Commonwealth Development Corporation and other multilateral European aid agencies, Asian Development Bank, etc., as primarily serving the interests of the industrialized importing nations.

The final chapters present the activities and goals of NGOs in the First World represented at the meeting from U.K., Australia, Japan, U.S.A. and Denmark, and

NGOs in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and India. An interesting history of the Chipko Movement to save trees in India is given by V. Shiva and J. Bandyopadhyay; it is a part of the activist Gandhian nonviolence movement which turned ecological. The book ends with the "Declaration of the Conference", an open letter to the president of the World Bank by Edward Goldsmith, publisher of *The Ecologist*, and a useful scientific explanation of world climate and tropical forest destruction problems for the layman by Peter Bunyard.

This book might be criticized for not being a more "balanced" presentation of forestry problems in the Third World. Why were not experts from Third World forestry departments, FAO, World Bank, and other agencies participating at the conference? Doubtless they have given arguments and perhaps some answers to many of the NGO representatives. But this probably would have made the conference unwieldy and compromised its objectives. I have read plenty of accounts of the tropical forest destruction problems written by government officials, international experts and professional foresters. Nearly without exception, they consider the problem to be merely a technical yield problem or a macroeconomic one; rarely are improvement of the peoples' socioeconomic conditions, more equitable land and income distribution, or rural quality of life ever major objectives of "forestry" programs. Forestry cannot be considered in isolation from the total lives of the people who live (legally or "illegally") in or near the forest areas.

The answer to the crisis in Third World forestry thus does not lie in the realm of forestry as forest experts here and elsewhere define it. It lies in national politics, culture and international relations; it is ultimately the problem of exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful.

I have written a long review because I wish that more people in Thailand, especially forestry experts and officials, would study this book. Thai forestry is basically still the old feudal system where the central governing power holds title to all forest resources and gives out concessions to the favored wealthy or urban business interests; the rural poor have no legal rights to exploit the resources or use the land. Corrupt and "influential" people, of course, can break the land use laws with impunity to their advantage and pay meagre wages to the poor who are forced to serve as their accomplices. There are new programs to change and correct this situation, of course, but they are too little, too late.

The Green E-sarn program which involves replacing some native forests containing diverse useful species of plants with eucalyptus plantations, should also be examined in the light of experiences in neighboring countries. It is basically similar to exploitative projects elsewhere in Asia that were designed to provide cheap industrial raw materials, and have failed to help the rural poor. They caused protests and even riots, just as they have here recently. The main objective of a forestry program must be to improve the quality of life in rural areas, not merely make the area green, or help entrepreneurs and industries.

W. Y. Brockelman

Center for Wildlife Research

Biology, Faculty of Science

Mahidol University

Rama 6 Road, Bangkok 10400

