About 18 months ago I presented a paper looking at prospects for sustainable management of forestry in the Solomons. There was some prospect that it could be achieved. Today I can’t be so optimistic. In Solomon Islands, forestry is a critical issue for the financial security of the country.

AusAID has supported a number of forestry management initiatives in Solomon Islands, one of which was an inventory project assisting the Solomon Islands Forestry Division to assess the extent of the resource. In 1992 it was estimated that the commercial volume of timber from the forests that were accessible by normal logging methods was about 13 million cubic metres. On a predictive 50-year cutting cycle, the potential sustained yield in the Solomon Islands was about 325,000 cubic metres per year. In the last four years the potential sustained yield has been significantly exceeded. In 1995, it is estimated that 750,000 cubic metres of logs will be exported (not including about 80,000 cubic metres of logs processed domestically). This figure doesn’t include the volume that is felled for local use, used for road building and bridges or wasted. Because of this overcutting, in the last three years the sustained yield potential has probably been reduced to about 275,000 cubic metres. Calculation of sustained yield is dependent on a cutting cycle of about 50 years but is also dependent on certain assumptions about the way the forests are being logged and being managed. To come back and re-cut the Solomons forests in 50 years and get equivalent sorts of yields to what they are now producing means that everything has to be done correctly now. The reality is that there is no adherence at all to a silvicultural regime that will allow this to occur. Many of the harvesting operations are still poorly planned and poorly managed. The current rate of export harvest plus harvesting for domestic consumption leaves about 15–20,000 hectares of land cut over every year—at the moment that land is simply left, there is no follow-up silviculture at all.

The result is that estimates of sustainable yield are very much theoretical. There is a lot of land that when the loggers return in 50 years they won’t even bother stopping to look at the forests for commercial volume, it simply will not be there. The sustained yield may only be based on a return period in excess of 100 years which would mean that the sustained yield would come down to very small levels, well below 275,000 cubic metres.

About 80 per cent of current harvesting activity takes place on customary land with...
Solomon Island forest resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Export volume (cubic metres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>302,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>543,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>591,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>628,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>&gt;750,000 (est.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Forestry in Solomon Islands is rather a sad concept. In the rural areas, where most of the people live, a strong relationship exists between the people and their land. This is particularly the case where the landownership system in Solomon Islands is based on customary landownership.

In Solomon Islands, the average export log price for 1994 was about SI$400 per cubic metre. The average stumpage was about SI$40 a cubic metre but some of the stumpages have been as low as SI$12 a cubic metre. What this means is that the customary landowners have essentially given away their birthright and a large part of their future prosperity for very little money. Some of the landowners attempt to redress this by going into village-level processing. There are about 460 sawmilling licences issued in the Solomons at the moment, but this is not always the best option economically for them.

For 1994, 56 per cent of all Solomon Islands export revenue was based on log exports and 31 per cent of all government revenue came from that source. There is no other country in the world as dependent on log exports as Solomon Islands, and more critically, there is no fallback position. Once the forest is gone there is no alternative.

Some other economic indicators are similarly frightening. Solomon Islands has a high population growth rate, 3.5 per cent at the moment, 50 per cent of the population is less than 15 years old, and life expectancy is rising all the time.

The new government has brought out a new forest policy. The policy specifically states that they want to encourage sound forest management and land conservation for development and maintenance of those forest resources in perpetuity, involving a moratorium on the reduction of the number of logs and licences, and a complete ban on log exports by 1999. These are all sound principles. Unfortunately, some of the...
The Timber Control Unit Project supports natural forestry management. This unit is managing the harvesting program of over 800,000 cubic metres a year spread over islands all over the Solomons but it has only 13 staff and most of those staff are trained to certificate level only. There are very few professionally trained foresters in the Solomons.

Solomon Islands forests can be managed sustainably. We now have the technical information which wasn’t available prior to the inventory. We know that reforestation has not been occurring as it would be needed to provide a follow-on industry and we believe that the way logging is being conducted now severely jeopardises the sustained yield potential of the forests. AusAID and a number of other agencies are continuing to assist the Solomons forestry sector and a lot of people are putting in efforts in difficult conditions. There is also the potential that outside pressures will force real discipline on the forestry sector. This may come through the initiatives of the International Tropical Timber Organisation and other groups such as the Forest Stewardship Council who are talking about linking access to international tropical timber markets to sustainable sources of supply. If this was the year 2000 and the International Tropical Timber Organisation initiatives were in place and the importing countries abided by the rules that have been agreed, then the Solomons industry would all but close down because the market place would be cut off. But this is 1995, and with a bit of luck the industry will almost have succeeded in making that year 2000 target fairly irrelevant, at least in Solomon Islands.

Institutional structure
The main agency for implementing forest policy is the Forestry Division of the Ministry of Forests, Environment and Conservation. The Division has five key areas

- planning and inventory
- research
- plantations and management
- extension
- Timber Control Unit

statistics show that Solomon Islands still has a long way to go.

At the provincial government level we find some quite interesting diversions between policy and reality. The Western Provincial government has an official policy that logging around the Morovo Lagoon is banned, but logging is still taking place right around the areas that are meant to be protected for potential world heritage. The international community has a lot to say about forestry in Solomon Islands. The IMF and World Bank have linked a structural adjustment package for Solomon Islands to sustainable forest management, but that initiative has been shelved until the Solomon Islands government can come back with some real indication that sustained forest management is more than just policy.

The resources to manage these enormous forestry treasures are dwindling quickly. The Forestry Division in the Ministry of Forests, Environment and Conservation has five sections within forestry. The Plantations and Management Section may well go out entirely if the plantations are sold and nobody knows whether that has taken place now but the staff in this section are already being offered redundancy payments.

This paper is an edited version of a talk given at the ‘Solomon Islands Update’, held at the National Centre for Development Studies on 10 October 1995.