

SOLOMON ISLANDERS PROTECT RAINFOREST

by John Seed

"Saving the tropical forests is the world's most important conservation priority." Dr. Lee Talbot, Director-General, International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

The Solomon Islands are a double chain of quiescent and extinct volcanoes running some 400 miles southeast of Bougainville (which is east of New Guinea). Lying on either side of latitude 10°S and surrounded by some of the deepest oceans in the world the Solomons have spectacular shorelines varying from extremely deep sounds, through coral reefs to some of the biggest lagoons in the world. Large volcanic craters, sometimes at sea level, are still hot to walk on with boiling mud pools and jets of sulphureous gas. Twenty-four forest types, ranging from tall lowland tropical rainforest to moss forests in the high mountains, cover the Islands from the sea shore to the highest peak at 2,450 metres.

Isolation and a small population has maintained the naturalness and beauty of the Solomon Islands. Although "discovered" by the Spanish in the fifteen hundreds, it was almost four centuries before further contact, when Australian "Blackbirders" exported 30,000 Islanders for the sugar plantations in Queensland and Fiji. The single biggest development came with Lever Brothers taking over coconut plantations for their soap factory in Sydney. By 1907 Levers had leases on over 300,000 acres of the Solomon Islands and had persuaded the British Colonial Office to extend these leases from 99 to 999 years!

Fortunately for the local people, very little of this land was developed by Levers. However, in 1961 Lord Cole, Chairman of Unilever, visited the forests before the customary owners demanded the return of their land. Unilever prevailed upon the Colonial Government to waive regulations that required logging companies to process 20% of their cut locally and to replant after logging. To this day Unilever exports only whole logs creating minimum local employment and Overseas Aid Agencies have had to fund reforestation programmes. Very sound corporate strategy - socialise the unprofitable section of the industry (i.e., reforestation), but keep the profitable section in private ownership. This waiver is particularly damaging when it is realised that Unilever has over half the annual logging quota for the whole Solomon Islands - a massive 225,000 cubic metres per annum.

93% of the people of these islands live their lives as subsistence farmers, one family in seven having no cash income whatsoever. The forests provide these villagers with a host of products which disappear when their forest is destroyed. These range from lawyer vine for lashing their buildings together to certain trees from which their canoes are carved. Many wild fruits and animals are part of their diet, and their customary medicines are also found in the forest.



Traditionally the land is "owned" collectively by communities, and some of these communities are now resisting the logging of their forests.

The following story was told to us in a palm-thatched hut in a village named Paradise on the island of New Georgia. The two men interviewed are subsistence farmers aged about 45 and 60. They grow sweet potato, taro and cassava. To pay the \$10 annual head-tax they grow coconuts which they dry for copra. Vincent Vaguni, an executive member of the Western Solomons Provincial Parliament translated it from Roviana language.

Forty of us from Karoga tribe chased the LPT employees who were bringing in materials to start a new logging camp at Enogae. After chasing the workers we took all LPT's properties in our canoe and transported them to company's ship which was floating nearby.

The white man who was there asked us to go to the other side of the bay, so we all went across. Suddenly, twelve policemen asked: "Who tell you to come?" The Chief of Koroga, Rueben Gambule answered: "It is our own wish to come and chase LPT workers. And this land where LPT's is trying to put up the camp is not LPT's land either. This land is Koroga Land and it's for us Koroga tribe." After bits of talking and questions, the police then ordered us to go to Temarae and to wait for them there.

When all of us arrived, the police continued investigating the matter. The big man of the police said that we had gone against the law, so we'll go to court.

After three days or so, a boat of policemen arrived arresting us to Munda Court hearing. The court told us:

"You are wrong. You made a mistake so you will go to prison." All forty of us were being charged with "Unlawful Assembly" and were sent to prison in Honiara for two months.

After being in prison for two months, we returned home to see our families. While we were in prison, LPT's had gone back to Enogae and actually put up the camp where houses, employees and logging machinery occupied the whole area of land which we had stopped them from doing.

We had gone to prison for our land and LPT's had actually started logging, we felt that if we just keep quiet, then LPT will ruin our land and will spoil our forest. We thought to have a second action which we had warned LPT and the government about, that was to spoil and burn LPT's properties. The warning has gone. We don't hide these things.

It happened that very early in the morning after walking in the bush all night, two hundred and ten of us from Paradise and Jericho within Koroga tribe went to Enogae and started to wake people in their houses. We warned them to bring their belongings to somewhere that was safe. We told them that we were going to burn the houses, bulldozers, cranes, trucks and nothing will be left except Koroga land.

Some women were very frightened, but we told them that we were not going to kill them or do any bodily harm to anyone, except LPT's properties. The workers then didn't be afraid. Everyone was burning houses. LPT's workmen also helped us to burn the houses and machineries which was very amazing

to see them doing that. We were glad some LPT's workers helped us and also advised us how to burn the caterpillars.

Two policemen were there couldn't do anything to us except they were just watching the flames up in the air then ran away into the bush to Munda. We chew betelnut with LPT workers and watch it burn. We then returned home.

Very early in the next morning, Field Force arrived holding guns and went around Paradise Village asking us who were at Enogae. No one was talking to the policemen. We just stay quiet.

Those of us who raid Enogae were not afraid of the police with guns, because we wished to die in serving our trees and lands. The Field Force investigate the matter. They stayed about two days. They couldn't get anything from us except they arrested seven which appeared in a list forwarded by someone from Enogae who recognised them.

The seven were kept by the police in Gizo for some time waiting for legal advisor. Then court decides seven go to prison for two years, so our seven people went to prison. Our wish was to all go to prison for the sake of our lands and forest. We don't like those seven to go by themselves.

The logging company, LPT is Levers Pacific Timbers, a subsidiary of Unilevers. Unilever trades in some 90 countries and has an annual turnover of over \$10 billion. They estimate that \$1 million damage was caused.

A week after the raid, the Western Solomons Provincial Government passed a motion (without dissent) calling on all Unilevers

subsidiaries to get out of the province. There has been no response from the company and LPT's still export over 200,000 Cu.M. of rainforest logs annually from New Georgia to Japan. They have not, however, attempted to return to Koroga Land and the clearing at Enogae has now been resettled by Koroga people, who have planted gardens and orchards there.

The seven arrested will soon be back with their families (who have been looked after by the tribe) after fourteen months in jail.

Though Levers claim to have changed their logging practices since the raid, most of the land that they have logged in the Solomon Islands, during the last twenty years lies derelict, eroded, useless, an eerie graveyard covered in vines. The Honiara "News Drum," in its story about the raid mentioned that "Studies showed that it would cost three times the amount set aside annually (from royalties) to replant forests, mainly because of the cost of brushing or clearing the pesky merremia (sp.) vine eight times a year lest the trees be choked. And logging along skidder trails leaves little topsoil left from the normal four to ten inches. Studies have said it would be difficult to grow any commercially valuable product in such soil.

Where reforestation is attempted, it is paid for by aid grants from Australia, N.Z., the E.E.C. - subsidising the loggers, but unable to keep pace with the damage.

The Rainforest Information Centre, Box 368, Lismore, N.S.W. 2480, Australia, is setting up a world rainforest action network and welcomes enquiries.

John Seed of the Rainforest Information Centre has been investigating the destruction of the rainforests by multinational logging companies.



Vincent Vaguni