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Research targets new markets and community management for PNG forests

Papua New Guinea and Australian forestry researchers are working together to find ways for PNG communities to sustainably manage the forests that are integral to their livelihoods but which have already been logged by commercial operators.

In the past 30 years, more than 3.5 million hectares of the 7.5 million hectares of accessible forest in PNG has been logged, leaving behind cut-over forests.

PNG forest scientist Cossey Yosi, of PNG's Forest Research Institute, is taking part in the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) project while also studying for a PhD at the University of Melbourne's Department of Forest and Ecosystem Science.

The ACIAR project is based in PNG's Mamose Region, where there are about 550,000 hectares of cut-over forest. The communities that have agreed to take part are Sogi in Madang province (20,000ha) and Yalu (5,000ha) and Gabensis (2000ha) in Morobe province.

Cossey Yosi is working with Australian researchers, PNG authorities and the local communities groups to identify forest management strategies and income opportunities that can be marketed as certified sustainably harvested, Fairtrade timber.

Mr Yosi, whose home village, Zare in Morobe Patrol Post, is surrounded by the pristine forest of the Waria Valley, is passionate about finding new ways PNG communities can manage their forests and develop new income opportunities.

"In PNG about 80 per cent of the population depends on the forests for food, shelter, medicine and cultural benefits, and 97 per cent of the land and forests are under the customary ownership of groups or individuals," he said.

"At the same time there is relatively little knowledge about the economic value the cutover forest might provide, apart from selling the timber to logging companies. And at community level a relatively small number of people have been making decisions on behalf of their communities, without necessarily consulting them."

"By quantifying the make-up of species, growth rates and carbon storage in the cut-over forests we plan to develop sustainable harvesting regimes for the remaining trees and identify new income opportunities for local communities," Mr Yosi said.

"I will be developing strategies to involve these communities more in the decision-making," he said. "If we can give them sound information and suggest ways to manage the forest for sustainable forest certification we can offer options that will help meet the needs of a broader range of stakeholders."

ACIAR research program manager Dr Russell Haines says there has been a perception that the logging companies have taken the high-value timber, but with improved management the remaining timber and regrowth in these areas could be sustainably harvested on a smaller scale.

"There is potential for local communities to tap into premium markets for sustainably harvested Fairtrade-certified timbers, with Australian businesses already offering a 20-40 per cent premium for certified products from PNG.

"Other opportunities include the harvesting of mushrooms for local markets, timber and rattan for

local furniture manufacture and timber for local construction or export of community-produced wood to high-value markets,” Dr Haines said.

Dr Haines says identifying and quantifying the resources cut-over forests can provide is an important step in developing economic information that can be used as the basis for attracting investment in these regions and developing markets.

On a wider scale the ACIAR project is expected to help PNG develop regional planning and management systems with a better understanding of the carbon dynamics in the cut-over forests. The techniques being developed for assessing forest resources, including carbon storage, are likely to be applicable to other island countries with complex forest system similar to those of PNG.

Mr Yosi’s PhD research is sponsored by ACIAR through its John Allwright Fellowship program, which is designed to help partner countries develop their research capacity.

Cossey Yosi is currently in PNG on a 3 week field visit to collect further information, and Russell Haines is also visiting PNG on behalf of ACIAR.

Visit www.aciar.gov.au for further information.

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