Sustainable forestry and certification in the Commonwealth¹

by P. J. Wood²

Sustainable forest management is the goal of most foresters and of the informed public and it is the main mission of the Commonwealth Forestry Association. Certification of forest products is a recent market phenomenon, driven partly by Non-Government Organizations and partly by retailers; it is largely a western initiative with parallels in agricultural and pharmaceutical products. Certification does not guarantee sustainability — it only defines what the buyer demands, like lumber dimensions. Environmental or social certification is a contractual specification and the European market seems currently to be the furthest forward with such schemes. Without such market pull, interest in certification would collapse. There are now many initiatives world wide; the Forest Stewardship Council began as an accreditor of independent certifiers, but countries are now developing their own criteria and especially seeking approaches through the International Standards Organization (ISO), an ISO 14000 or ISO 9000 approach. The relevance of certification to many smaller tropical Commonwealth countries is limited, since international trade is of little concern, and many newcomers to the international market have not yet adopted certification requirements. The challenge for the future is to find norms of country-specific good forest stewardship and certifiers are now turning their attention to other objects of trade.

L'aménagement forestier durable constitue un objectif pour la plupart des forestiers et pour le public informé et demeure la principale mission de l'Association forestière du Commonwealth. La certification des produits forestiers représente un phénomène récent sur les marchés, dérivant en partie des organismes non-gouvernementaux et en partie des détaillants de produits forestiers; ce phénomène est en grande partie occidental et accompagné de mouvements semblables dans le secteur agricole et pharmaceutique. La certification ne garantit pas la durabilité — elle définit seulement ce que l'acheteur exige, les dimensions du bois d'œuvre par exemple. La certification environnementale ou sociale est une spécification contractuelle et le marché européen semble actuellement le plus avancé dans cette veine. Sans une telle exigence du marché, l'intérêt pour la certification tomberait dans l'oubli. Il existe à l'heure actuelle plusieurs projets à l'échelle mondiale; le Forest Stewardship Council a débuté ses travaux en accréditant des certificateurs indépendants, mais des pays élaborent présentement leurs propres critères et recherchent tout spécialement des approches alignées sur les normes ISO 14000 et ISO 9000 de l'Organisation mondiale de normalisation. La signification de la certification pour plusieurs petits pays tropicaux du Commonwealth est toute relative puisque la problématique du commerce international soulève peu d'intérêt, et que plusieurs des nouveaux joueurs sur la scène internationale n'ont pas encore adopté de lignes directrices rattachées à la certification. Le défi à venir réside dans l'élaboration de normes de bonne gestion forestière spécifiques à chaque pays. Les certificateurs portent maintenant leur attention sur d'autres produits du commerce international.

Introduction

When I was asked to give this paper by the conference organizers I accepted with some trepidation, partly because there are many more experts on certification than I, and also because, even for the experts, things are developing fast and often confusingly. As chairman of the Commonwealth Forestry Association I am committed to the pursuit of sustainable forest management, and I am sure that all of us are similarly committed. However, we must be aware that there are many who oppose or do not care about sustainable forest management. They include the cut-and-get-out merchants (as some extremists cynically label all foresters), the preservationists (who would leave all forests to nature, except for a few hunter-gatherers) and those who see forests — on flat land at least — largely as areas for agricultural expansion. I mention this because it is helpful to know who the participants or stakeholders in the certification debate may include.

Certification of forest products by the market is not only highly political and changing rapidly, it is also very complex, and increasingly so with every international meeting that discusses it. My recent experience from many Commonwealth

countries, particularly those that are smaller or tropical may, I hope, enable me to contribute helpfully to the discussions at this meeting, though I would not claim in any way to speak on behalf of any specific country. With this background I express my gratitude to the organizers for inviting me to speak to you today.

History and Forest Management in the Commonwealth

I want to start with a little history, because the history of "forestry" in what are now the Commonwealth countries seems to me remarkably uniform. Since the end of the last ice-age forest has been widely regarded as an obstacle to agricultural expansion, and also or as a more or less limitless resource. A fascinating study by Perlin (1989) details example after example of rise and fall of empires in relation to the state of their forests, from ancient Greece to medieval England and on to the USA. Sustained yield, as sustainable forest management was called, was only gradually invented in Europe in the 16th to 17th centuries, though there is evidence that religious houses with limited forests practised management earlier. And even today there are few examples of forests that have been harvested more than four or five times, though there are excellent examples of thriving, regularly harvested, productive forests from Australia, India, and Canada.

¹Paper presented at the Canadian Institute of Forestry 88th Annual Meeting, Thunder Bay, Ontario, 20 August 1996.

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The History of Government Forest Ownership

In most countries, rulers or kings claimed ownership of many of the best forests (the earliest examples of state ownership), but sustainability was not the main objective; protection against rural people with draconian punishments for transgressors was the norm and royal hunting was often the major interest. But sustainability of trees was important in places, and as the CTFT (1989) records, the rulers of medieval Senegal imposed decapitation on those who dared to cut a *Fadiherbia albida* tree. However, rulers also had to live with traditional rights of rural people in forest areas and so long as populations remained low, through disease, war, and famine, the pressures on the forests often remained limited. With population increase localized shortages of wood in Europe became a major driving force for colonization and whatever the reasons for today's global population explosion, there is no doubt that greatly increased numbers of people put increasing pressures on forests.

Thus colonial governments created forest "reserves", both as stores of timber for national needs such as future wars, and of land for future agricultural expansion. Both of these curtailed traditional use of forests and the "problems" of forests today in most tropical countries can be related to declining resources and increasing demands from people. Where land is communally or privately owned the problems are different, but in many tropical countries there is increasing concern that forest ecology is increasingly unable to supply what is demanded of it. Add to that the fact that wood is a more environmentally benign construction material than its competitors, and that there is increasing demand for it (Sutton 1993), and one completes the picture of global needs for forests both natural and planted.

The Food Production Imperative

Democracies, with elected governments, have to listen to the demands of their constituents. In a country such as Canada, which does not have an exploding population demanding new farming lands, the majority of people may well prefer the country's forests to remain controlled by their government. In poorer countries, too, such as some rural parts of India, people would prefer to trust the government forest department rather than a private landowner. In many of the poorer countries the demands for farmland are inexorable and I have no doubt that we will see continued deforestation (= development of unused agricultural land) continue for the next 25 years at least if people are not to lack food even more than they do today. Indeed, the annual rate of forest conversion to other uses is reported as 27 million ha. The expected world population of about 8.5 billion by 2025 is one of the main factors to be taken into account, but sustainable forest management becomes progressively more difficult in such circumstances. And in the context of concern about deforestation, it is widely felt that it is largely controllable under existing laws, if applied, politically difficult as this often is.

A good example of a Commonwealth country with this dilemma is Zambia, which has more than 40 million ha of tropical woodland, most of it classified by FAO and the Agriculture Ministry as potential crop land. A recent report which detailed this also contained a paragraph on the serious rate of deforestation in the country, without apparently linking the two. What happens after the land is cleared for agriculture is clearly of great environmental and social concern and agroforestry is wide-

ly regarded as a key technology. However, I regard it as anomalous, to say the least, that timber coming from farmlands could not currently be certified as coming from a "well managed" source!

The overriding importance of land for agriculture in most developing countries and indeed in most developed countries also, shows that agricultural land and technology should be the norm against which other land uses should be compared. The principles of sustainable agriculture are those with which sustainable forestry should be compared, especially in relation to soil maintenance.

Sustainable Management, Criteria, and Indicators

Various definitions of sustainable forest management (and also sustainable agriculture) have been made. They usually include the health of the forest ecosystem, the importance of biodiversity, and the provision of environmental, economic, social, and cultural benefits to present and future generations. Much time has therefore been spent on defining Criteria and Indicators. Criteria — the conditions of the forest which we wish to maintain to provide these benefits, and Indicators — the ways in which these criteria can be objectively monitored.

A number of Sets of Criteria and Indicators have been developed since Rio in 1992 (Grayson (1995) in the Commonwealth Forestry Association booklet provides some useful summaries) derived from international meetings; thus the "Helsinki Process", the "Montreal Process" and the initiatives of the International Timber Trade Organization (ITTO). Its International Timber Trade Agreement (ITTA) includes acceptance of the need to manage forests sustainably. Many tropical countries have been developing National Forestry Action Plans incorporating criteria and indicators for their forestry sectors — though unfortunately sometimes in isolation from other sectors which have a major effect on forests.

Certification

Certification is well established in laboratory control and in agriculture in developed countries. In forestry it is relatively untried and started as a NGO initiative "to improve both forest management and managers' accountability", setting out to convince major consumers, such as large retailers, that independent verification was required and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (1993) presents a view from the international NGOs that the trade is not to be trusted to monitor itself.

So far only about 0.5% of world timber trade derives from certified forests (Bass 1996) yet exports of forest products represent more than 3% of world trade. Some approaches to certification claim the public interest, such as producer accountability, reducing government costs for auditing and improving forest management, whilst others support the trade interest aiming at including increased market share, raising prices, and defending producers' access to resources. What is undoubted is that any market demand for certification reaches back into forest management in a way that similar demands in other sectors rarely do.

Forest Certification (as defined by Upton and Bass (1995)) aims to work as a market instrument to improve forest management and to improve the market share for the products of such management. Being market-based it should be voluntary and it takes place by assessing the effect of forest practices against

standards previously agreed by stakeholders. It should be carried out by third parties which can assure the public of independent and professional judgement. There has been much debate, especially in southern countries of who is a valid stakeholder and who is the public. One way of approaching this is to prepare a matrix showing possible stakeholders (governments, indigenous peoples, consumers, etc.) compared with, for example, their degree of dependency, legal rights, and relative power.

Certification is in no way a guarantee of sustainable management, though better management may arise from it and one of the main reasons for proposing it is to "slow forest loss and degradation". It aims at improving the quality of forest management that is environmentally sensitive, socially aware, and economically viable.

Certification Schemes

Currently the leading certification organization is the Forest Stewardship Council, having been first on the scene in 1993, set up by the WWF. It is run by a Board which is 75% NGO but also has wood industry representation (see box). There is little representation either of governments or from forest scientists. It accredits certifiers rather than certifying forests itself.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

Set up in 1992, with its founding Assembly in Toronto in 1993, the FSC is a non-government non-profit organization which accredits certifying agencies for sustainable forestry. It works to 10 basic principles, that forest products to qualify for certification should follow:

1. Compliance with the FSC principles.
2. Clear tenure and land-use rights.
3. Indigenous peoples' rights respected.
4. Forest operations to maintain or enhance workers' and local communities' long-term social economic well being.
5. Optimizing benefits from the forest.
6. Critical ecological forest functions maintained and adverse effects minimized.
7. A management plan consistent with FSC principles.
8. Regular monitoring of state for the forest and chain of custody
9. Maintenance of natural forests — should not be replaced by plantations.
10. Plantations — should complement ecosystem health, provide community benefits, provide valuable contribution to the world's demands for forest products.

The FSC has currently accredited several certification bodies, including:

- The Rainforest Alliance Smart Wood Programme, USA,
- Scientific Certification Systems Forest Conservation Programme, Oakland CA, USA,
- SGS-Qualifor Programme, Oxford, England,
- Soil Association Responsible Forestry Programme (RFP), Bristol, England,
- Silva Forest Foundation, Canada

The ITTO represents member governments and has also defined criteria for sustainable forest management which are being adopted and adapted by some countries.

The ISO is not seeking to develop timber certification standards itself but is being approached by other countries to use its existing internationally accepted protocols for the purpose.

The (British) Soil Association's Responsible Forestry Scheme covers both natural forests and plantations (until recently the FSC did not accept plantations) and sponsors a "Woodmark" for the products of their scheme.

Some Regional and Country Experiences

The following accounts are necessarily very subjective, culled both from literature and experience. They are intended to contribute to the debate.

Australia

A conference sponsored by the Australian Department of Primary Industries entitled "Certification and Labelling of Sustainably Produced Forest Products" was held 26–30 May 1996. The FSC hoped to raise interest for an FSC Australia initiative. Australia and Canada have jointly put up a proposal to ISO for an ISO 14000 EMS (Environmental Management System) approach to the "Sustainable management of forests which are the source of wood and fibre to make building material and paper products to meet the needs of the peoples of the world".

Canada

Canada has adopted the ISO 14000 approach (CSA 1995) and expects to have some forest areas certified under this scheme in 1996. Also, in January 1996, a Canadian FSC Working Group was set up with four chambers of representation, economic, environmental, social, and indigenous, the objectives being to lay the establishment of a formal FSC national working group. FSC has already accredited Silva Forest Foundation has been accredited as a certifier. A North American buyer's group of retailers committed to purchasing certified timber planned. (Pierce and Ervin 1996). The Canadian Standards Association is shortly to publish a Sustainable Forest Management System (SFM) for Canada, which will be tested widely in the field.

Britain

Most of the forests of the United Kingdom are planted; they are highly regulated, felling licences, and replanting requirements being tightly controlled, so that sustainability is largely assured. A set of national standards has been prepared drawing on a number of other certification initiatives, which is currently under consideration by stakeholders. An Indo-British initiative was begun in 1994. There is some concern with the cost of external certifiers, particularly as there is unlikely to be a premium price for certified home-grown timber in the UK. Similar concerns are considered by Varangis et al. (1995).

Central Africa

I have chosen this region as an example because many of the countries, such as Malai, Zambia, and Tanzania, have a number of similarities which affect their forestry needs. First, some are landlocked, with difficult access to sea ports. Second, they

all have areas of mature industrial forest plantations which supply their forest industries. Third, they are all in the process of — or in the case of Zimbabwe, have largely completed — the commercialisation/privatization of these plantation forests. Fourth, they all have large, poor rural populations who depend for forest products and grazing on natural woodlands. Finally, in common with most countries in the region, national governments are short of funds, having to service international debts as well as support the development of their peoples, so that forest authorities are often underfunded. There are strong moves to transfer management responsibility for natural woodlands to local communities. Under such circumstances certification is of little interest, especially as much wood from natural forests is taken “illegally” producing no revenue to support sustainable forest management. Only the plantations can currently be described as effectively managed and if there were a market demand for certification it could well begin here.

Malaysia

There is a close contact with Canada through the Malaysia–Canada initiative and a recent joint meeting between the Universities of British Columbia and Malaysian Agriculture, at which it was pointed out by the Malaysian Minister for Primary Industry that commercial forestry is a relatively minor contributor to deforestation and that poverty and underdevelopment will continue to be the major cause unless addressed (Anon. 1996). Much effort is being put by Malaysia in implementing forest management practices based on ITTO initiatives, so as to achieve fully the ITTO objective of sustainable forest management by the year 2000 (Ibid p 2). Both the ITTO “Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Natural Tropical Forests” and “Criteria for the Measurement of Sustainable Tropical Forest Management” are being used. Certification would be introduced if the market demanded it provided it was not too burdensome in terms of cost or bureaucracy. Malaysia appears to be pursuing an ISO 9000 approach.

Nigeria and India

Nigeria and India have gone from being timber exporters to timber importers in recent years. Many of their neighbours are still in a timber-surplus situation and are still in the process of developing sustainable management systems for their forests. Nevertheless there is little evidence of a “green” market demand for certified timber from international trade at present. For both countries increased supplies in-country will have to come from new plantations.

A word is needed about forest plantations. For countries that do not possess good natural forests or which have destroyed them, the only way forward is to plant. A recent Commonwealth Forestry Association conference on “Privatisation — or public forests?” concluded that the private sector would have to play the main role in creating the new forest resources that the world will need in the next century. The recent recognition of plantations as valid “well managed” forests by FSC is therefore a step in the right direction.

Certification — Environmental and Social Issues

The social specification is by far the most contentious. Obviously no consumer would willingly buy a product from

To help us in our discussions let us make some guesses at how the future might look:

- Any regulation/certification will have to be cheap — and it will be recognized that there are many routes to sustainability, not only one.
- There will be a global need for more wood, so countries with forest will become richer than those without. Fuelwood collection will continue to degrade natural sources in poor countries.
- If climate change occurs as predicted there will be increased amounts of temperate and boreal timber available.
- There will be a massive global increase in the need for food and farmland.
- Short rotation plantations, especially in the tropics will be increasingly needed to supply national and international markets; this will compete with farmland demands. There will be conflicts over subsidies.
- The private sector and global companies will have increasing power

There will be decreased resources available to governments so tree planting will have to pass largely to the private sector. Government Forest Departments are likely to remain as regulators only.

(with acknowledgements to J. Sayer, private communication)

a firm that maltreats its workers or creates poverty, and is always at liberty to choose the source of what he or she buys, and has the right to know where the product comes from. But there is real concern about interference in sovereign states, notwithstanding the “rights” of buyers to demand what they want in the market place. This is especially true in developing countries, where economic development is regarded as an essential pre-requisite for alleviating poverty. What is the best way of dealing with child labour, for example? Trade restrictions or dialogue or reforming the terms of world trade?

Concerns from the South are to reconcile environmental concerns with social justice. There is also much concern and some anger over the perceived market discrimination against tropical timber in world markets — not least because the industrial countries seem to be creating an impression with their own public that something effective is being done to “curb the tragedy of deforestation in the tropics”. There is a strong feeling that Latin American countries must develop national or regional standards, preferably using ISO structures; it is felt that the FSC minimizes the importance of economic development, being overwhelmingly dominated by northern environmental groups. Fair prices in world trade seem to be a major objective of unified action for the region (Centeno 1994).

There is also concern in many regions over the potential costs of certification, which are variously estimated at about US\$0.30–0.60 ha⁻¹ in developed countries and 5–10% of logging costs in tropical countries (US\$1.30–7.00) (Varangis et al. 1994).

Experience from the European Market

The market drive for certification in Europe has been led by FSC and other NGOs in association with dominant

retailing groups. Surveys of consumer preferences have been carried out and it appears that there is a willingness to pay a premium for the extra costs associated with certified timber (though it is interesting to note that the British home-grown timber trade does not expect a higher price for its products). The WWF plus 95 Group is also active in this respect, with 63 timber trade outlets in the UK signed up to sell only certified produce. However, there are still too few certified forests to meet even the UK demand. Belgium, Holland (with the second largest per capita consumption of tropical wood in the world after Japan) Germany and the Scandinavian countries are all keenly examining the UK FSC initiatives as models for their own markets and there is likely to be dearth of certified wood to supply them all.

The Future Challenges

I return to my initial theme: we would all like to see forests properly managed in perpetuity for their unique products and properties and for the benefit of the peoples of the world. Is certification the way forward to achieve this aim? I hope that the discussions at this conference will make a contribution to answering this question, and that there will be indications of the best ways to go about this.

Let us finally look outside our profession; how do the fishermen view future certification of their products? Will users of steel demand that the mining land was not purchased compulsorily at unfavourable terms? Reason will prevail, and there is much reason in the timber certification debate at the moment. But there is no last word.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to the following specialists in certification for sparing time to bring me up to date with many facets of the current situation: Mr. S. J. Bass, Director, Forestry and Land Use Programme, IIED, London; Mr. F. R. Miller, Programme Director, Qualifor, Oxford; and Mr. T. J. Rollinson, Secretary, British Forestry Commission. Nonetheless, any misunderstandings of the subject in this paper are entirely my own responsibility.

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