

NEW ZEALAND PACIFIC AID FORESTRY PROJECTS – GOOD FOR CONSERVATION?

by Tim Thorpe

One of my more vivid, and somewhat humbling experiences when I worked as a volunteer forester in Vanuatu, occurred the first time I walked across Erromango, the island where I was working, with an Erromangan guide. As we ambled along through the forest, me loaded down with pack, food and possessions, my guide carrying nothing more than a bushknife, he began to explain something of the forest that we were passing through, and its inhabitants.

"Snake-rope" he said, "good for drinking", and proved it by cutting off a section and holding it up so that the water could drain out. "Wild fowl", he exclaimed as he turfed a piece of wood skyward, missing the intended target. As we walked he cut off small saplings and sharpening them, hurled them into the bush as spears, practising for the time when he would go hunting. Rounding a corner he cut a leaf off a fern, and fashioning a drinking vessel, dipped it under a small watercourse and offered me a drink. It was discarded afterwards. I thought to myself, can we in New Zealand ever know the forest as this man does? Who am I to come here and tell these people about forestry?



The author reviewing a New Zealand-sponsored forestry project on Erromango Island, Vanuatu, with senior forest guard Daniel Laeyang.

Forestry Vastly Different

It is a thought that I still ponder from time to time as a consultant adviser to some of the New Zealand-funded projects in the Pacific. Forestry in New Zealand is vastly different to forestry in the Pacific, as you would expect. Not only are the physical components of forestry, such as species, climate and soils, different but also the social, economic and political components. Forestry is only one component in the development of the Pacific Island states, and many more factors affect the outcomes of a project than might be the case in New Zealand.

New Zealand has been involved in forestry in the Pacific through its Official Development Programme, for at least 30 years. During that time it has built up a considerable body of knowledge of forestry issues, wider development issues, and knowledge of the partner countries in

which it works. Forestry has been among the more "successful" of the development projects that New Zealand has been involved in, a fact not often recognised in New Zealand and only now being recognised internationally.

There are close parallels with the development of forest administration here in New Zealand. New Zealand forestry has developed from a philosophy of mining the (native) forest to the concept of sustainable resources. Many developing countries are still in the throes of the mining philosophy. In earlier years much of the aid programme was spent analysing forestry needs as part of overall development needs, a process that is still continuing today. Much effort was also put into experimental forestry to determine the species that would grow best, how to grow them, and how best to utilise the existing resource. Training was an important part of the programme, as it still is today, so that skills would no longer have to be imported. Systems and administrations had to be assisted to develop within the context of overall government structures.

As the so-called developing countries have developed so to have the type of assistance that New Zealand has been prepared to offer. Much of the forestry that has been carried out has been in the form of large scale plantations with the ultimate aim of timber production. Some of these projects are beginning to mature, such as the Fiji Pine Commission, and now New Zealand is offering assistance to utilise the resource. This project is also an example of where New Zealand management and long term adviser assistance has been reduced considerably as positions have been localised.

New Aid Approach

Since the mid-1970s an approach to developmental forestry called community or social forestry has received much attention in the forestry world. This approach is small scale by nature, and tries to involve communities in forestry projects, identifying their needs and attempting to meet them. In this way much more attention is placed on fuelwood, agro-forestry, amenity, extension and cultural plantings. New Zealand has contributed to a number of projects of this nature, although it could be argued that most forestry projects in the Pacific are examples of community forestry due to the commercial nature of land ownership here.

A good example of a community project assisted by New Zealand is the Malaita Reef-forestation Project in the Solomon Islands. This project is the first planting on custom-owned land in the Solomon Islands, and involves close co-operation between the Solomon Islands Government as managers, the community as landowners and workers, and New Zealand as aid donor. The project has been going since 1985, and a decision has been taken this year to carry out plant-

ing on custom land elsewhere in the Solomon Islands with New Zealand assistance.

Community forestry partly arose as a result of a growing recognition that tropical forests were being destroyed around the world at an alarming rate. The same factors have also led to the strong voice of the conservation movement worldwide. Replanting through the traditional large scale plantation forestry approach was not enough to keep up with forest destruction. Social factors or land issues meant that plantation forestry projects were not always acceptable culturally or could be implemented with confidence in their long term future. Community forestry sought to identify ways in which people would want to become involved in forestry so that planting rates could be increased and pressure on the remaining tropical forest relieved.

Relieving the Pressure

Through its support for community and plantation forestry projects the New Zealand aid programme has been involved in conservation in the Pacific. Plantation forests when logged will relieve the pressure on native forest for timber. Community forestry enables planting for conservation purposes according to community needs. Both plantation and community forestry projects have assisted with the rehabilitation of degraded areas, eg erosion prone sites, or restocking of logged over forests. New Zealand has also assisted in the development of the profession of forestry in several countries. Often foresters have been the only scientifically trained professionals able to give advice to governments and administer programmes of a conservation nature.



New Zealand forestry advisors with Tongan counterparts on 'Eua Island, inspecting a Pinus caribaea nursery.

In fact both plantation and community forestry can assist with the rehabilitation of degraded areas, for example erosion-prone sites, or restocking of logged over forests. New Zealand has also assisted in the development of the profession of forestry in several countries. Often foresters have been the only scientific-trained professionals able to give advice to governments and administer programmes of a conservation nature.