

Siberian forests threatened

THE IMPACT of the breakup of the Soviet Union might generate environmental shock waves at least as great as those in the political sphere.

At threat are one of the world's great natural resources – the enormous conifer forests of Siberia. These forests cover over 3.7 million square kilometres, an area more than double that of the Amazon's rainforests. They contain more than half the world's conifers and a quarter of the world's wood.

The declining power of central Russian control, the devastated local economy and the pressing need for hard currency makes the exploitation of the timber difficult to resist. Loggers from Korea, Japan and Western nations are already hard at work.

The most cost-effective way to cut the trees is to fell everything within a given area, without attempts at forest management. This makes it much easier to remove the logs, but the consequent impoverishment and destabilisation of an already poor soil will also make it the quickest way to turn forest to desert.

Once cut, the trees are exported as whole logs or sawn into planks in local sawmills. Russian milling practices are hampered by old technology and are extremely wasteful.

The long-term consequences are all too familiar to those who have followed the destruction of tropical rainforests: erosion, the silting-up of rivers, the serious decline of fisheries and the destabilisation of the sustainable, subsistence economies of indigenous tribal groups.

Another concern is the release of the huge quantities

of carbon stored in the forests and the effect of this on global warming.

Wilderness going in New Caledonia?

IN A REPEAT of events occurring elsewhere in the Pacific, logging in New Caledonia's Ni valley will soon destroy one of the island's last kaori forests and possibly its most important wilderness areas.

New Caledonian kaori (*Agathis lanceolata*), closely related to New Zealand kauri, has already been severely reduced by felling. Stands in the Ni valley where logging has just started represent the finest remaining old-growth forests.

Until recently the remoteness of this valley and rugged terrain of the adjoining ranges north of Noumea has prevented mining and forestry, and limited the activity of hunters. The diverse dryland forests and marquis scrublands adapted to the mineral-laden (ultrabasic) soils of southern New Caledonia are highly endemic and extremely ancient.

A large number of animal species, especially birds, inhabit the region. Perhaps most notable is the endangered crow honeyeater for which these forests are one of the last refuges.

Few Ni valley kaoris have as yet been felled. However, construction of an access road to the head of the valley has already resulted in extensive environmental damage. Debris from the road has buried areas of forest and entered streams while fires have destroyed several hundred hectares of scrub and forest.

Given the low level of land use by Kanak people in the Ni valley and surrounding ranges, preservation of these forests would be less difficult



SIMON BULMAN

A mature kaori in the Ni valley. This tree has a girth of nearly nine metres.

than in other areas in New Caledonia and represents one of the few chances for conservation of a relatively unmodified wilderness area on the island.

Simon Bulman

Mitsubishi Man retires hurt

THE COMIC BOOK extolling Mitsubishi's role in tropical rainforest logging (see *Worldwatch* in the last issue) has been withdrawn from Japanese schools. The Japanese Education Ministry asked schools to remove the comic from its libraries on the

grounds that it was "public relations material for just one company".

The 216-page comic, which attributes the bulk of tropical deforestation to tribal slash-and-burn farming, has instead provoked scrutiny of Mitsubishi's dubious record of unsustainable logging in South-East Asian rainforests and its role as one of the world's largest importers of tropical timbers.

The book was to have been the first in a series introducing Japanese corporations to high-school students. Following the bad publicity the series has been abandoned.