

Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea or Hong Kong, originates from Sarawak. Also, since June this year, the importers are not buying timber from either Sabah or Brazil. They claim to have alerted their suppliers in the tropics as to their policy and the change to "sustainable" sources. All very encouraging steps.

Conservation groups have urged them to buy timber from small-scale, low-impact portable sawmill operations in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere, plantation tropical timbers such as rubberwood from Malaysia, teak from Java, hoop pine from Australia, and New Zealand plantation-grown alternatives such as eucalypts and macrocarpa (see panel).

The policy claims that commercial logging plays a minor role in global rainforest destruction, citing a 1981 FAO figure of 6.6 percent. This much-quoted but out-of-date figure has been discredited by the World Bank, World Resources Institute and the *Ecologist* magazine, who give global estimates of 18 to 50 percent. The FAO notes, furthermore, that in Asia over two thirds of the forest cleared by landless cultivators, fire or for agricul-

ture, had already been logged over. This again highlights the primary role that logging plays in deforestation, especially in Asia, the source of 75 percent of New Zealand's tropical timber imports.

Finally, many of the tropical timber species the policy lists as being necessary for specialist uses, such as merbau, meranti, hopea, keruing, chengal, sapele, iroko and ramin, have been listed as endangered, vulnerable or requiring conservation measures by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO). Many have become commercially extinct where they were once common, due to exhaustive harvesting. Two species commonly used in New Zealand, merbau and ramin, were very nearly included on the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) appendices earlier this year, only being withdrawn after pressure from Malaysia and Indonesia.

The trade seems totally unwilling to respond to these concerns, preferring to "mine" species to extinction and then move on to another species or a new area.

retailers and importers. Considerable progress has been made towards working out avenues for the phase-out of rainforest timbers from destructive sources.

As a first step, the retailers Benchmark, Carter Holt Building Supplies and Placemakers have agreed to end all advertising of tropical timber decking. The retailers and the New Zealand Timber Importers Association have fully supported the growing and use of special-purpose timber species such as eucalypts and macrocarpa as alternatives to rainforest timbers.

But is the reform of the trade fast enough? Where is the New Zealand government's response to deforestation? It seems the government is promoting plantations as the answer to deforestation: a strategy that could see more rainforests being cleared and indigenous people dislocated to make way for plantations. Other governments are making efforts to restrict the tropical timber trade. The Austrian government, for example, has placed a 70 percent levy on unsustainable sources and required all tropical timber to be labelled.

The plight of the earth's remaining rainforests and their management is a matter of extreme urgency. The New Zealand Rainforests Coalition in its recent "Tropical rainforest policy for

New Zealand" has called for trade restrictions on timber imports, especially those from South-east Asia logged without customary landowner approval. The coalition has also urged the adoption in Pacific nations of comprehensive forest reserves, low-impact extraction methods that minimise damage to the forests, and for plantations to be established without further forest clearance. It has called for a phase-out of all unsustainable imports from these countries within two years.

The global rainforest timber trade is now at a point where it can help mould the future of the world's remaining rainforests. New Zealand is ideally placed to lead the world in changing to alternative timber sources such as our extensive plantation resource and to timber milled by low-impact methods in the Asia-Pacific region. It is time for the world to cut loose from a "sunset" industry and a history of rainforest desecration, and move to a future where forests are treasured for the life-supporting systems that they are. ♦



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