

Forestry Commission Support Project

ONE OF Guyana's great resources is its 16 million hectares of forest, much of which is unexplored and in pristine condition. How to wisely manage these forests is a challenging and sometimes emotive issue.

The economic mismanagement of the 1970s and 1980s did not leave a happy legacy. As the currency collapsed, the timber industry stagnated. Dominated by a handful of family firms, operating small concessions of around ¼ million hectares, profit margins were low and inefficiency rife.

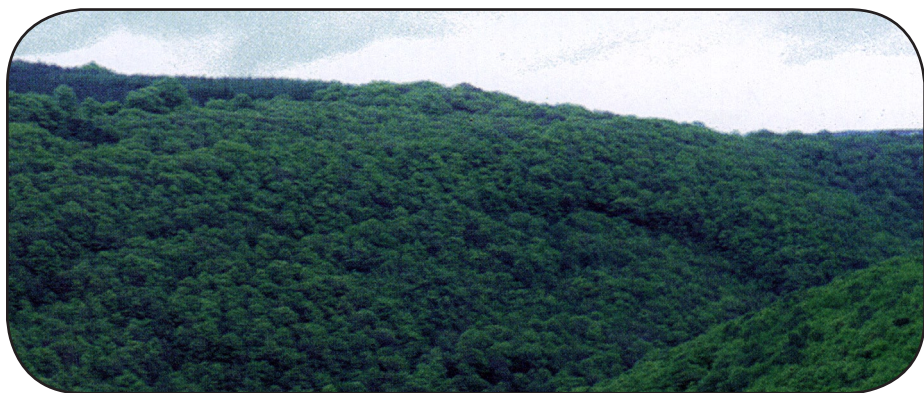
Recovery began in the 1990s - but there were problems, too. International companies were keen to invest - but the institutional strength needed to plan and control this industry had been eroded. The Government soon realised it needed to rebuild its Forestry Department - now renamed the Guyana Forestry Commission - if logging was to be effectively regulated.

First came a National Forestry Action Plan, completed in 1989. It set strategic goals for the country's forestry and looked for donor support to help meet them. Britain's Overseas Development Administration (ODA), now the Department for International Development (DFID), was approached and, in 1995, the Guyana Forestry Commission Support Project was launched with DFID support.

In 1996, **Chris Turnbull** was appointed project manager. A New Zealand forester, with experience working in the Solomon Islands and Ghana, Turnbull saw exciting new challenges in Guyana. "I was fascinated by Guyana's forest, home to such a diversity of life, including endangered species like the jaguar and the harpy eagle. The Guyanese themselves are a varied people, with six ethnic groups, each having a very different culture. I came to Guyana believing that, with the right policies and quality management, both the forest and the people could benefit."

An important first step was the negotiation of a moratorium on new forest concessions. The idea was to allow the Forestry Commission the space to turn itself into an institution capable of meeting the expectations and demands of a developing forest sector. New foresters have been drafted in and others are receiving intensive training. Salaries are being raised to market levels and bureaucracy streamlined to allow more staff to be deployed on front-line tasks. Gradually, a sense of renewed optimism is developing among staff as they take a lead role in defining different ways of working.

Forestry Commission staff also consulted widely to develop new standards designed to put timber harvesting on a sustainable basis, ensure minimal environmental damage and raise standards of employee health and safety. DFID then



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helped the Forestry Commission develop new survey methods to sample logged areas within the forest, allowing the Commission to check that agreed standards were being complied with.

Not everyone is happy with Britain's role in Guyana, with criticism focusing on the needs of Guyana's 45,000 Amerindians, many of whom live deep into the country's forested interior. DFID's harshest critic, **Marcus Colchester** of the World Rainforest Movement, recently used an article in the Guardian, a UK newspaper, to claim British taxpayers' money "is helping timber pirates rather than very poor Indians in Guyana." He went on to accuse DFID of being "supine" and of providing foreign loggers with ways to dodge the current moratorium on new concessions.

The Amerindian situation is not a simple one. There has been long-standing anger over continuing delays in addressing the question of Amerindian land rights. In particular, Amerindian groups are concerned that forest concessions will be allocated before the boundaries of their land are clearly demarcated. These worries have been exacerbated by recent moves in Guyana to issue exploratory permits, granting logging companies permission to survey areas of forest and prepare investment proposals.

Clayton Hall points out that exploratory permits will not be issued on Amerindian land or land claimed by Amerindians. Permits can only be used for research. They do not give rights to fell trees or construct roads, nor will they automatically lead to the granting of a timber concession.

Forestry consultant, **Pat Hardcastle** agrees that exploratory permits have a role to play. "The government has a duty to consider the interest of all Guyanese, many of whom are living in conditions of extreme poverty," he argues. "Guyana's forest resource must play its role in contributing to sustainable development. It is unrealistic to expect a poor country simply to set aside such a valuable resource."

The job of the exploratory permit is

to give the Guyanese increased control over how future logging is carried out. Detailed applications must be made, allowing the Forestry Commission to gather information on the timber company's past financial, social and environmental performance. Potential investors are able to analyse the viability of working the concession, but may not fell trees or build roads. Any information they gather must be publicly available. "We'll no longer be shooting in the dark," says Clayton Hall. "We'll be clear in our minds what any new concession can realistically offer."

Chris Turnbull points out the increasingly important role social development is playing in the Forestry Commission's work. As efforts are made to establish stronger links with Amerindian and other hinterland communities, a significant impact could be made on Amerindian standards of living. Work supported by DFID over the past year has identified key Amerindian needs and outlined a way forward for future initiatives.

The emphasis is on a long-term perspective balanced with short-term realism. Clayton Hall again: "No two trees are like. It is the same with forest management. There is no single 'correct' approach. We have to consider the environment alongside our national goals and aspirations. In the end, it is about making good judgments."

David Cassells agrees. He is director general of the Iwokrama Rain Forest Programme, an innovative programme of tropical rain forest research and development, with responsibility for managing almost 2% of Guyana's forest. "My view is that no country in the world has got it right yet," he says. "But when you look at a country like Guyana - if you consider its relative poverty - it's actually doing pretty well, and needs to be supported." He added, "If Iwokrama succeeds it is likely to be the catalyst for the development of one of the best tropical forest conservation systems in the world."

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