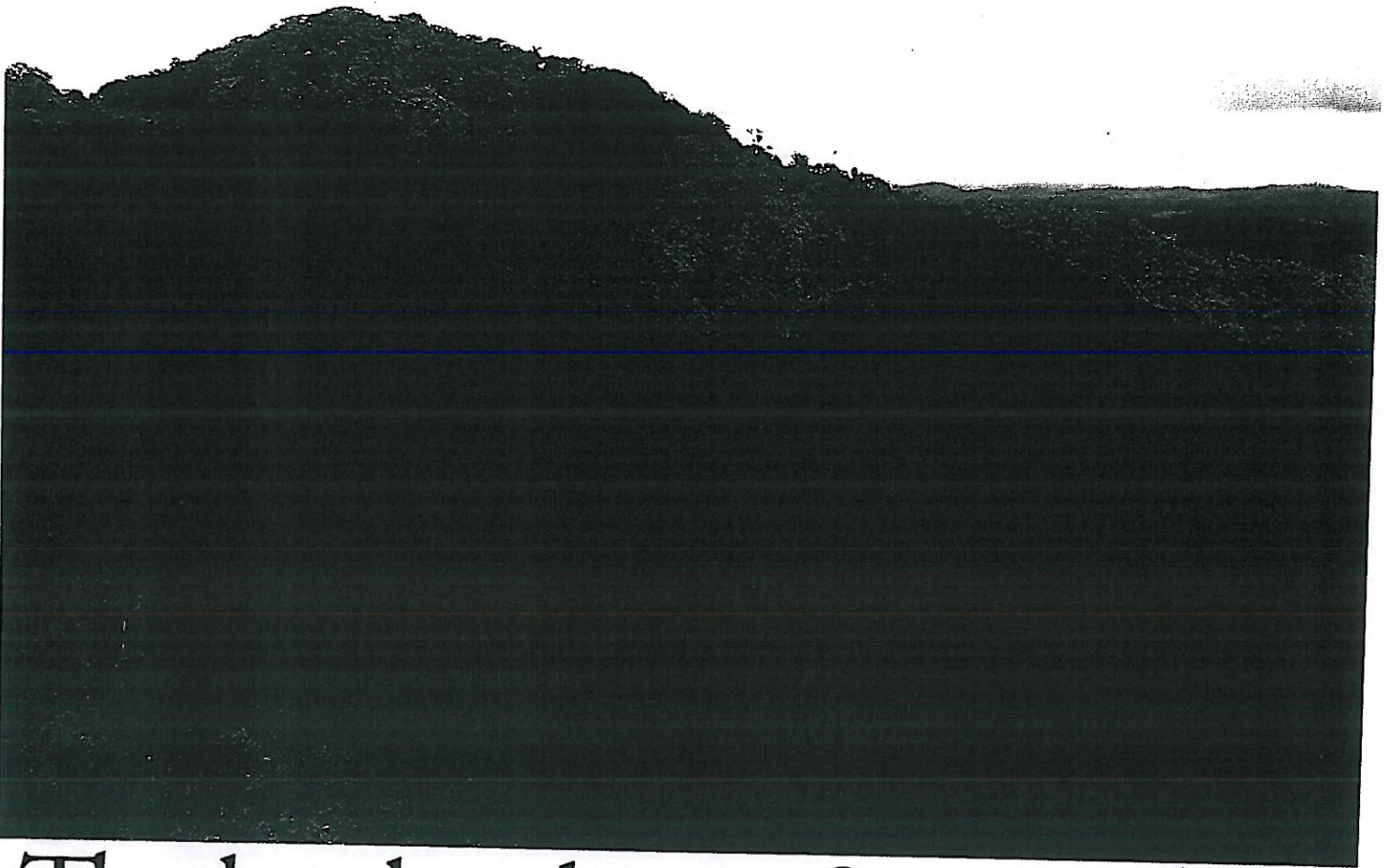


64708



The lowland rain forest of the Solomon Islands: A BLEAK FUTURE

by Gunnar Keppell

The Solomon Islands are a large group of islands blessed with extraordinary beauty. The combined landmass of the nation is 28,785 km², which is 10,000km² more than that of Fiji, more than twice that of Vanuatu, and about nine times that of Samoa. Being closer to New Guinea, it has many plants and animals that do not occur further eastward. For example, rats occur naturally in the Solomon Islands (actually all rats native to the Solomons are also endemic), while they were not found in Vanuatu and Fiji, until they hitch-hiked across on ships.

Until about 50 years ago, most of the Solomon Islands were covered with lush and dense rainforest. Some of these forests were actually old re-growth on former plantations that were abandoned after the population of the Solomon Islands crashed after European contact (Bayliss-Smith et al. 2003). In any case, the original forest cover of the Solomon Islands is rapidly disappearing and degrading, mostly because of logging. During a recent visit, I was able to

admire the beauty of the Solomon Islands and to get an idea of the status of its forests. Based on what I saw and heard, I believe that the future of the nation's lowland rainforests does not look bright.

My first destination was Choiseul (or Lauru as the island is locally called), the northeastern-most island of the Solomons. Many people described it to me as the last paradise, where forests and wildlife have not yet been ravaged by logging, and the island did not disappoint. In many places forest can still be found to cover the entire landscape from the coast to the mountains. This was truly impressive to me, as I have not been able to observe this before. I was studying rain forest trees and the island turned out to be the most diverse of all the islands in the Solomons. Together with local expert Myknee Sirikolo, we identified about 120 tree species with a dbh of 10cm or more in one hectare, which is 40 species more than on the other two island studies.

The high diversity of these forests was apparent in many other

I started to ask myself how the government could be so shortsighted to allow logging instead of planning for long-term gains through tourism. Over the following weeks, I learned that the major problem is not the government but the immense power that logging companies have. Not only do they contribute more than half of the nation's export income but also are they involved in many other businesses.

ways. Having spent much of my life in Fiji, I'm accustomed to quite nights in the forest, with the occasional owl or frog calling. On Lauru I was treated to a concert of several frog species and night birds harmonising with cicadas. However, the days of this last paradise are numbered. Over the last years, logging companies have started to launch their assault on the last remaining large timber source and when I visited 12 logging companies where operating on the island. Considering that it took only less than 10 years to almost entirely log out the forests in the Western Province, it is not hard to predict that all loggable forests on Lauru will have been exploited within the next five to ten years.

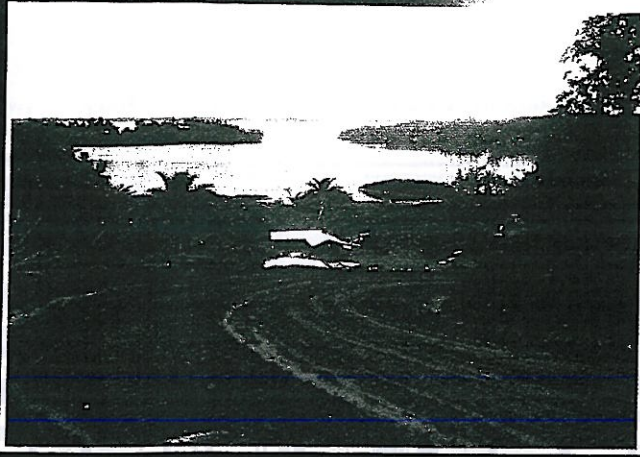
Why are people cutting their forests? Generally it is for short-term financial gains. Money is difficult to come by in many places of the Solomon Islands and a relatively (compared to the profits the logging companies are getting from the logs) small amount of money appears much more appealing than the forest. It is easily forgotten that the forest is the major source of food, building materials, medicines and many other things. A concept even harder to grasp is that the root systems of the trees in the forest hold the soil together, thereby preventing pollution and acting as a sponge to prevent floods.

Some of the results of logging are therefore easy to predict. The little money gained for the logs is soon spent. Water sources become polluted. Living standards drop as life becomes difficult as building materials, food sources and medicines are hard to find. Disputes for the remaining resources and about who is to blame for the problems arise, if they did not already arise during the logging. Other results are very difficult to predict. For example, in some places the rainfall drops after land is cleared through logging because the trees used to release huge amounts of water vapour into the air.

In addition, a damaged environment and disgruntled landowners are not good for initiating tourism projects. This is important because tourism is likely to

Above left: Last remnant old growth forests of Choiseul Island (Photo: P. Pikacha). **Right:** Illegal logging on the Bareke Peninsular, Central Marovo in the Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands. Notice the oil spills in the bottom left corner of the photograph. There was no license or record of this logging at the forestry department to log this land (Photo: Douglas. Pikacha).





Within the next 10 years, most (more than 90%) loggable forests in the Solomon Islands will have been destroyed by logging and with it many unique plants and animals displaced or lost forever.



Above insert: Log pond and erosion Bareke Peninsular, Central Vangunu Island, Marovo Lagoon (l) (Photo: D Pikacha). Logging damage, soil erosion, Makira Island (r) (Photo: Gideon Bouro). Northern common cuscus (*Phalanger orientalis*) on log after his tree was felled, Kolombangara Island.

This page: Destructive logging Baoro Highlands, Makira Island.

become a major industry in the Solomon Islands once there are few forests that can be logged remaining (i.e in about 5-10 years). The Marovo lagoon is an excellent example. I still remember admiring the beauty of the numerous small islands in the lagoon and imagining that tourists would be willing to pay to visit this place, especially once it would become a world heritage site. Soon after that my joy was dimmed, as we started to fly over extensively logged areas in and adjacent to the lagoon. Tourists definitely would not pay to see this! I also learned later that this logging has seriously impaired the efforts to declare Marovo Lagoon a world heritage site.

I started to ask myself how the government could be so short-sighted to allow logging instead of planning for long-term gains through tourism. Over the following weeks, I learned that the major problem is not the government but the immense power that logging companies have. Not only do they contribute more than half of the nation's export income but they are also involved in many other businesses. Basically, well-off people want to stay that way and have ways and means to get what they want and to remove people who dare to stand against them.

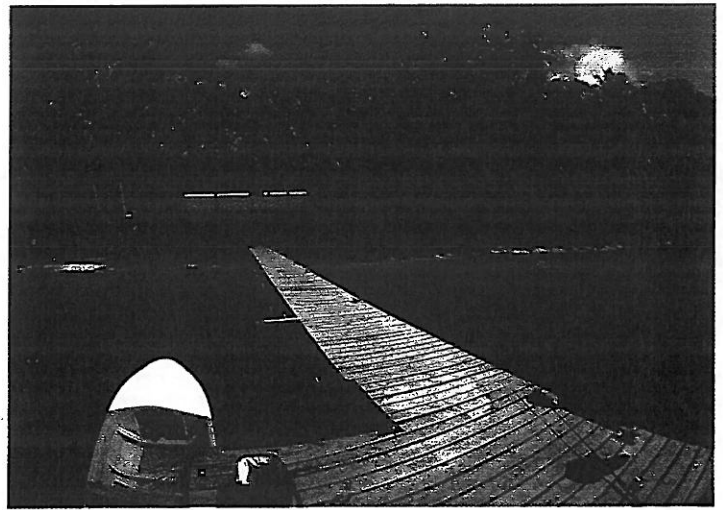
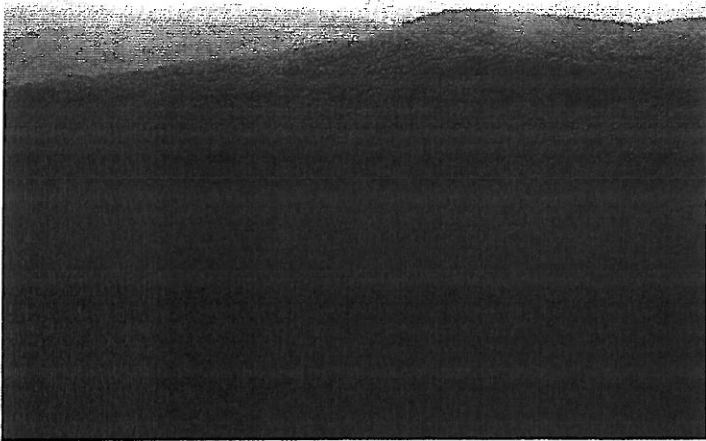
But that does not mean that nobody has the power to stand up against them. The island of Makira provides an excellent example. Here a group of conservation-minded landowners got together with the help of Conservation International (CI) and formed the Makira Community Conservation foundation Trust with the aim to protect their forests from logging. While this amazing initiative

has managed to protect large stretches of forest and several rare birds for several years, the project is currently facing its hardest test so far. Some landowners have yielded to the dollar sign and permitted logging on their land. While this is currently restricted to the periphery of the reserve, activities may extend to other areas.

Within the next 10 years, most (more than 90%) loggable for-

Some of the results of logging are therefore easy to predict. The little money gained for the logs is soon spent. Water sources become polluted. Living standards drop as life becomes difficult as building materials, food sources and medicines are hard to find.

ests in the Solomon Islands will have been destroyed by logging and with it many unique plants and animals displaced or lost forever. As a result, poverty will increase and living standards drop, because people in rural areas depend on forest products. Most of the remaining lowland forest patches will be in the hands of conservation-minded people, who then will have the opportunity to gain some financial revenue from their forests from ecotourism and visiting scientists.



Above: The Baoro Highlands, one of the largest tracts of unbroken tropical lowland rainforest left in the Solomon Islands. Without conservation efforts and political will these remnants of lowland rainforests are threatened of being permanently destroyed. With this loss the destruction of many forest dependent communities.

Above right & right: There is a need to plan for long-term development such as tourism. Solomon Islands, has some of the most beautiful and diverse islands in the South Pacific and world for that matter. Yet many of these potential development alternatives have not been realized. Short-term gain through logging is often the cause of much environmental damage, conflict among communities, social breakdown in Solomon Islands.

