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Social and environmental impacts of industrial tree plantations

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Pulp and paper mills do not build themselves. Well before the first bulldozer arrives on site to level the land where the pulp mill is to be built, consulting firms will have earned millions of dollars studying and designing the mill.

Consulting firms also design the framework that enables them to develop the pulp and paper industry. Jaakko Pöyry, the world's largest forestry consulting firm, won more than 110 contracts in Indonesia between 1979 and 1993. As Larry Lohmann points out, Pöyry's work often involves "lobbying governments, evaluating forest and land resources, lining up contracts from close colleagues in aid agencies, subcontracting lucrative work out to potential local allies, doing feasibility studies or market surveys, mapping out logging roads, establishing tree nurseries, and designing or engineering factories."

In 1984, Pöyry produced a report for the World Bank titled, "Strengthening the structure of the Indonesian pulp and paper sector". Four years later, this time paid by the Asian Development Bank, Pöyry's consultants worked on a project to identify sites for the development of the pulp industry in Indonesia. In 1988, Indonesian pulp production capacity stood at 606,000 tons a year. By 1999, partly as a result of Pöyry's advice, the figure was 4.9 million tons a year.

Every time Jaakko Pöyry is employed to carry out a study of a proposed pulp and paper development, the company faces a conflict of interest. Back in the 1980s, Pöyry's "experts" might have explained that the pulp and paper industry would bring with it billions of dollars of debt, land conflicts, destroyed forests, destroyed livelihoods, polluted rivers and even death for some of the people who opposed the pulp mills. They could have suggested that it would perhaps be better not to expand the pulp and paper industry. If they had done so, however, there would have been nothing more to do for industrial forestry consultants like Jaakko Pöyry. As it was, Pöyry won contracts on several pulp mill projects that they had recommended should be built, including Indorayon, Indah Kiat, Riau Andalan, PT TEL and Finnantara. Local communities and their environments end up paying the price for this conflict of interest.

Pulp mills are one of the most polluting of industrial processes. All over the world local communities protest about the pollution caused by pulp mills. Health risks include cancer, lung diseases, reproductive and hormone problems, heart disease, immune system damage and skin diseases.

The vast area of land that the pulp industry requires for its industrial tree plantations is often already in use. In April 2004 in Brazil, the Movement of Landless Peasants (MST) protested against the pulp and paper industry. Landless people occupied areas of industrial tree plantations owned by the pulp and paper companies Veracel, Suzano, Klabin, VCP, Aracruz and Trombini.



Thailand: The soil under Advance Agro's eucalyptus plantations is dry and stony.

Fast growing trees suck up nutrients from the soil meaning that fertilizers have to be applied. In Thailand, farmers call eucalyptus “the selfish tree” because of the amount of water that plantations of the tree consume. Farmers cannot grow rice in fields near eucalyptus plantations.

When plantations are clearcut large areas of soil are exposed to the rain, often leading to erosion. Plantation roads can also increase soil erosion. In Vietnam, for example, farmers complain about soil and sand washing down from eucalyptus plantations into their paddy fields and canals.



Swaziland: the pulp company Sappi's plantations are harvested in huge clearcuts leaving the soil exposed

In Sumatra, the industry has pulped vast areas of rainforest. In its place are monocultures of acacia and palm oil. A monoculture is the opposite of a biodiverse forest. Plantation managers use herbicides and pesticides to ensure that their tree plantations remain monocultures. Increased fire, including fires started deliberately by plantation companies, further reduces biodiversity.

From the perspective of the pulp industry an ideal tree plantation would have row upon row of identical fast growing trees, with straight trunks and few branches. The trees would be resistant to pests and diseases, tolerant of repeated herbicide spraying and would be easy to pulp. Forestry scientists are working to produce genetically engineered (GE) trees with these traits.

In Indonesia, Sinar Mas, Asia Pulp and Paper's parent company, has an ongoing research project with the University of Beijing for gene marker technology and gene mapping. According to APP's David Nicoll, "APP is not itself carrying out research into GM trees", but he hopes that the research with the University of Beijing will allow APP "to identify desirable traits, such as higher growth rates, desirable stem and crown form, desirable wood properties for pulp and paper, natural resistance to pathogens, and others". China is the only country in the world which allows commercial planting of GE trees. China's GE trees were developed by scientists at the University of Beijing.

Incorporated in 1994 in Singapore, APP is today the twelfth largest producer of paper and board in the world. In ten years it has run up a debt of US\$13.9 billion.

In 1999, one of APP's companies, Indah Kiat, consumed 6.8 million cubic metres of wood, almost 90 per cent from rainforests. Five years later, faced with mounting criticism, APP launched a "Sustainability Action Plan". By 2007, according to this plan, APP will be "reliant on renewable plantation-grown fibre from socially, environmentally and legally responsible sources." In other words, APP is currently reliant on timber from socially and environmentally destructive sources, including illegal timber. What's worse, the company will, for (at least) the next three years, continue to rely on these sources.

In January 2004, APP visited Germany, for an international office supplies trade fair called "Paperworld". A group of German NGOs, including Robin Wood, Urgewald and Pro Regenwald, protested at the fair against APP's activities in Sumatra. Activists hung banners and distributed thousands of leaflets to the visitors of the fair describing the problems APP is causing for people and forests in Sumatra.

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