

Is the clock finally ticking for PNG's illegal loggers?

by Lela Stanley

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In recent years, Papua New Guinea has become the world's biggest exporter of tropical logs. Nearly all of them are sold to China (Credit: Global Witness, 2016)

A time traveler from 1988 visiting Papua New Guinea's forestry sector today would find it distressingly familiar territory. Three decades ago, Commissioner Tos Barnett was conducting his *Inquiry into aspects of the forest industry*, published as a **two-volume survey** of the corruption and illegalities allowing PNG's forests to be felled wholesale and exported, to the country's economic and environmental loss.

Barnett's famous pronouncement that logging companies were operating in Papua New Guinea with the "self-assurance of robber barons" is as relevant now as it was then. (Indeed, hardly a think piece on the industry can be published without repeating the quote.) What *has* changed in the interim is that those mostly foreign-backed companies have cut and sold off many millions more cubic meters of PNG timber, in a process that has signally failed to bring meaningful development to the country's rural and forest-dependent communities.

PNG's ongoing crisis in forest governance has been meticulously documented since Barnett's day, including in a flurry of research published in the last several years. All of it tells the same story. Chatham House estimated in 2014 that 70% of the country's timber **may be produced illegally**. The sustainability certification organisation NepCON gave PNG **an abysmal score of 3/100** in its *2017 Timber legality risk assessment*. In July, my organisation Global Witness **published a report** that included an analysis of satellite images of eight of PNG's largest logging operations. All of the companies involved in those operations, based on imagery that documented violations of the Forestry Act, appear to have broken the law many times over. None of them have faced any legal consequences, and all continue to sell PNG timber abroad.

For Papua New Guinean communities that depend directly on their environment for their livelihoods and cultural heritage, this devastation of their forests is a legal outrage as well as an existential threat. PNG's customary tenure system grants

control over land to the people who have lived on and used it for generations. It should be no surprise that among the legal violations linked to logging that my team has documented across the country, violations of landowner rights are paramount. The people we have spoken with tell [virtually identical stories](#) of losing their land to fraud and outright theft by companies that appear to operate outside the rule of law.

This situation is deeply frustrating, not least because we know it can be much better. PNG already has a reasonably robust legal framework to protect its forests. Those laws are simply not being enforced. And government agencies charged with overseeing the country's other natural resources have made important strides toward the transparency critical in wiping out corruption. PNG is a member of the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#), which publishes information on revenues and beneficial ownership in the mining and oil and gas sectors. The Mineral Resources Authority has made maps of mining concessions [freely and publicly available](#) on its website. There is no reason the Forest Authority can't be resourced to do the same with logging concessions. It's political will, or the lack thereof, that has made this problem intractable for so long.

There are glimmers of progress here and there. The PNG Forest Authority is currently developing a Timber Legality Standard in consultation with the country's environmental NGOs, in a welcome sign of openness. But such mechanisms are only as good as the will behind them. Prime Minister O'Neill invoked the long-anticipated 2020 "complete ban on round log exports" [in a speech to Parliament](#) this July. More recently, however, I was told by a government official that the ban may be applied only to logging projects launching in 2020 or later, not existing ones – which would make it effectively meaningless.

So the question is: if the PNG government will not keep its forests from being illegally felled, what might?

Well, another critical change since the late '80s is where that timber is sold. China now consumes more timber than any other country, including 88% of PNG's log exports last year, or north of 2.7 million cubic meters of wood. Although it does not yet ban the import of illegal timber — which is how it is able to keep buying in such quantities from countries like PNG and Solomon Islands, another high-risk producer — most major economies, including its export markets in the U.S., EU, and Australia, do. That means that China's big customers should be increasingly scrutinising its products for the presence of illegal wood, and dropping those that can't pass the test. If and when China joins this group to ban the import of illegal timber, PNG will be financially compelled to enforce its own laws, and protect its own forest peoples' livelihoods in the bargain. A prudent resource-dependent nation might already see the writing on the wall.

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PNG is now preparing for its ultimate close-up at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be held in Port Moresby this November. President Xi Jinping will be there to launch new investments in the country, which is lately one of the newest members of China's Belt and Road infrastructure and trade initiative. If PNG hopes to attract other investment, surely it would also be wise to demonstrate to APEC members that its government respects the law. This could be done by placing a moratorium on all logging projects to review whether, or how, their operators have broken it.

A previous version of this article incorrectly referred to the Forest Administration rather than the Forest Authority.

Author/s:

Lela Stanley

Lela Stanley is the Policy Advisor for the Asia Forests team at Global Witness, and is based in Washington, D.C.

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