



4.4 Conserving the world's forests: steps along the journey

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The struggle to preserve the planet's rich biodiversity will be won or lost in its remaining forests. By far, the largest threat to forest biodiversity is habitat destruction. Nearly half of the world's forest cover has already been lost, and if current rates of deforestation continue, huge areas of the world's natural tropical forests and a great many forest species will disappear within the next 100 years.

The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) believes that, outside of protected areas, this trajectory can be reversed if forests are managed responsibly. WWF considers independent, multi-stakeholder forest certification as a sure investment in improved forest stewardship. Certification is contributing to the greater recognition of the importance of environmentally and socially responsibly forestry practices, and is helping to clean up the timber industry by engaging producers, retailers and consumers in this effort. By engaging the forestry sector in responsible forest management through initiatives like WWF's Global Forest & Trade Network (GFTN), the power of the global marketplace can be harnessed to drive improvements in forest management. This helps to protect endangered species and preserve the planet's rich biodiversity for future generations.



BY ENGAGING THE FORESTRY SECTOR IN RESPONSIBLE FOREST MANAGEMENT THROUGH

INITIATIVES LIKE GFTN, THE POWER OF THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE CAN BE HARNESSSED TO DRIVE IMPROVEMENTS IN FOREST MANAGEMENT.

Heading in the right direction

The conversion or degradation of a forest can happen very rapidly. Moreover, it is blindingly obvious when it is happening. One does not have to be an ecologist to see that many expedient and ill-conceived practices are not good forest management.

Forest certification attempts to infuse the principles of responsible forest management and to demonstrate evidence of an improvement against the possible alternatives—such as degradation, conversion and illegal logging—and perhaps most importantly, against no intervention at all. Although it has not been proved whether certification is a completely effective strategy for conserving biodiversity, if people waited until there was overwhelming evidence, there would be no forests left.

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The need for some sort of positive action overrides waiting for perfection. Given the conversion rates in some places, there isn't the luxury of stopping and waiting 20 years to figure it all out. Certification is the best compromise, providing a foundation based on sound principles and a robust process. But it should not be used as proxy for protection — effective land-use planning is a prerequisite to forest certification. Certifying forests that should have been protected after a thorough multi-stakeholder land-use planning process is never a good place to start.

WWF believes that responsible forest management provides the necessary framework that will provide the analysis needed, utilizing certification as a system to adjust variables and get it right. To begin with, certification was a leap of faith; would anyone use it and would it offer conservation gains were the main fears. From WWF's experience in working with forest managers—from what can be seen and measured—it seems to be that we leaped in the right direction.

Protecting valuable and threatened forests

Although scientific studies evaluating the effect of forest certification on the conservation of tropical biodiversity are still greatly needed, an increasing wealth of practical experiences has emerged. This demonstrates that engaging industry as part of the solution, rather than only the problem, is yielding positive results. WWF's GFTN has seen countless examples of credible certification's ability to not only help meet the world's growing demand for timber responsibly, but also its capacity to safeguard the planet's valuable and threatened forests and the people and biodiversity that depend on them.

In central Africa, GFTN has witnessed the profound impact of certification on the vital rainforests of the Congo Basin. By engaging seven companies operating in the area — who collectively manage more than three million hectares (ha) of forest, of which about two million ha are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) — in implementing environmentally and socially responsible forest management practices, GFTN is helping to conserve ecologically significant habitat for elephants and great apes.

GFTN and WWF are working with GFTN participants in the Congo Basin to promote reduced-impact logging (RIL) and management of high conservation values (HCVs) within their logging concessions. As a result of these efforts, wildlife inventories have been conducted and wildlife populations are being monitored regularly. These actions will ensure that the best forest practices are used to minimize the impact of logging on forest biodiversity while protecting HCVs, including threatened wildlife. HCV is still a relatively new concept and is evolving. When the assessment is done comprehensively and is reflected in the management plan and procedures, the HCV approach is a powerful tool. An effective assessment is one thing, but much of GFTN's work entails ensuring that the companies it works with know what to do next, both in actions that will take them closer to certification and in how they adapt their management plans to incorporate the assessments.

Box 1. Managing forests to protect wildlife

The FSC-certified concession of Danzer's *Industrie Forestière d'Ouessou* (IFO), a GFTN-central Africa participant in the Republic of Congo, was found to contain high population densities of gorillas, due to its proximity to the Odzala-Kokua National Park. IFO is cooperating with local NGOs and the Congolese government to prevent poaching and unsustainable hunting through the use of eco-guards. By employing these eco-guards, IFO is controlling the illegal hunting of rare and endangered mammals such as gorilla, elephant, chimpanzee, bongo and forest buffalo in the forest concession. The company also reduces the demand for bushmeat on the part of their workforce by importing cattle and fish from a nearby village every week. By engaging with companies like these, GFTN works to ensure that forests are responsibly managed in a way that maintains their high conservation values.

Certification has proved to be an effective tool in preserving the habitats of threatened species. A study conducted by WWF (van Kreveld and Roerhorst 2009; see article 4.3 in this issue) found that in contrast to other types of logging, responsible logging in accordance with the internationally recognized FSC principles is effective in preserving adequate living conditions for great apes. The study found that large mammal diversity in responsibly logged areas did not differ markedly from that of protected areas. While vast protected areas such as national parks and nature reserves offer ideal habitats for great apes, the report concludes that FSC-certified forests can be useful supplements to such protected areas, forming corridors between individual, isolated great ape habitats.

Sustaining biodiversity

GFTN is also working to conserve the rich biodiversity of one of the most threatened forest ecosystems in the world, in the heart of Borneo. The Sabah Forestry Department (SFD), a GFTN-Malaysia participant, has made a commitment to eliminate illegal logging in the Ulu Segama and Malua forest reserves by pledging 241,098 ha to FSC certification, setting aside the 34,000 ha Malua Forest Reserve for primate conservation.

These reserves provide critical habitat for 25 per cent of the total orangutan population of Sabah. This is the largest orangutan habitat in northeastern Borneo, and it is essential that management practices in the area provide for the survival of these endangered apes. Working collaboratively with GFTN-Malaysia, SFD has agreed to achieve forest certification and to demarcate strict conservation areas of this essential orangutan habitat. By working together to manage these biologically rich forests responsibly, GFTN and SFD are ensuring that they are conserved for a long-term and sustainable future.

In the same way, GFTN is working in South America to protect biodiversity in the Amazon. Providing support and guidance to participants attempting to achieve FSC certification, GFTN is training companies on measures such as RIL to reduce their environmental impact. A fauna monitoring study by WWF Peru (Ledesma and Zuñiga 2009) confirmed that these practices are paying off. The study compared large mammal

diversity in the certified forest concession of GFTN-Peru participant *Aserradero Espinoza* with mammal populations along the Madre de Dios River in the Tambopata Natural Reserve, finding that large mammal species, such as jaguars, were equally prevalent in both areas. These findings demonstrate that when forests are responsibly managed they can maintain the species richness that might be expected only in a protected area.

By engaging forest managers in working to conserve the rich biodiversity found in the forests of the Congo Basin, Borneo and the Amazon, GFTN is able to implement workable solutions that transform the forest products industry into a champion for sustaining biodiversity for future generations.

The best compromise

While we have seen countless examples of certification's ability to transform forest management practices, and their impact on the species living there, we also recognize that there is room for improvement. In terms of what's economically possible and what's scientifically understood, certification is the best compromise. Accepting that industry will continue business as usual whether we like it or not — choosing not to discontinue logging in areas for which concessions have been allocated — certification provides a way of modifying companies' behaviour in 99% of cases; the other one percent lose their certificate and pay the penalty. And the uptake of certification will increase when adequate capacity and investment are in place to overcome the technical challenges of certifying tropical forests, and when there is a clear and consistent demand for certified timber.



In our work with forestry companies and communities across Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe, GFTN has witnessed the impact of industry in expanding the extent of certified forests; this drives improvements in forest management worldwide. Currently, GFTN participants manage more than 27.4 million ha of forests, 20.2 million of which are now credibly certified.

By working with these companies to implement responsible forest management practices, GFTN helps industry to recognize the title and rights of indigenous communities, carefully manage forests with significant concentrations of biodiversity and endemic species, maintain forests and determine harvest limits that maintain ecosystem integrity.

Credible forest certification is the most effective way for companies to prove that they are acting responsibly. It is a solution often chosen after a series of related drivers, occurring as a response to questions that could previously not be answered: such as, was this wood legally and responsibly harvested? Where markets, governments or investors do not ask too many questions, certification suffers. GFTN's role is to ensure that market influence is strong and that through engagement, forest management companies are better equipped to engage with stakeholders.

Working together

Does certification work? It's a valid question. The answer, today, with respect to WWF's conservation agenda is that it appears to. What is missing is the empirical evidence to show that certification delivers in every situation.

Ultimately, certification is a compromise, and a rare one; it has so far been able to bridge the historical gaps between forest managers, NGOs and local stakeholders. Credible certification schemes, such as FSC, are able to review and improve their own performance. However, there is still a great need for longer-term analyses of the effects on biodiversity before, during and after logging. This is an area where academia, organizations such as WWF and the companies it engages with must come together to continue driving improvements in the way conservation values are monitored, maintained and enhanced.

We live in an imperfect world and recognize that there is always room for improvement when are working with initiatives such as certification schemes. The evidence shows that things are pointing in the right direction. This may not sound that exciting until we consider the alternatives: no assessments, no monitoring, conversion, clearance and degradation leading to habitat loss.

At the very least, certification is giving the world's valuable and threatened forests and the people that manage them time until a better solution is found. In some cases, it's doing much, much more than that. And I'll take that when compared with the alternatives.

For more information

For more information about GFTN, please visit gftn.panda.org.

References

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