

Feature

Rainforest Plan Upsets The Amerindians

by Nills Learmond Campbell

THE world's first rainforest laboratory, which is planned to determine ways of sustainable development of the forest while also exploiting mineral and other resources, is facing opposition from Guyana's Amerindian tribes.

The Amerindians, whose forebears settled the region long before Columbus appeared, are angry at what they say is government failure to consult them before launching the project.

Representatives from the Akawato, Arawak, Carib, Macushi, Patamona and Wapishana tribes, plus other Amerindian participants, held a four-day conference in Georgetown. In a strongly worded declaration they expressed concern that decisions were being taken "with regard to our forests, rivers and natural resources which will change the way of life of our Amerindian communities forever".

The rainforest project, which is the cause of the Amerindian disquiet, is being undertaken jointly by experts from the Commonwealth and Guyana.

The proposal is for a 360,000-hectare (one million acre) forest conservation programme, perhaps the biggest project ever mounted to fight degradation of tropical forests.

A third of the area will be maintained as a pristine wilderness, while allowing study of the flora and fauna, the sources and sinks for water, minerals and gases, the ecological interaction in the area and the way species evolve.

The remaining area will be used to support development along ecologically sustainable lines, including small-scale mining. Exploitation of trees is not intended to be used until systems are in place to ensure sustainability.

The designers of the scheme concede that the Amerindian people will never

have experienced an intrusion of this nature before. The Guyana government undertook to prepare them for it and to establish safeguards against uncontrolled new settlement. It has already organised controls to protect local people against common viral infections which forest dwellers will not have been exposed to.

However, at their meeting Amerindians expressed deep disappointment that the government did not consult with them before launching the multi-million dollar programme.

Numbering only about seven per cent of the country's population, they have for generations occupied the hinterland region. Thus they have come to be known as "the children of the forest". Some 90 per cent of the country's 700,000 population is concentrated along the 430 km of coast, leaving Guyana's remaining 133,000 sq km of territory sparsely

populated. The Amerindians are equally disappointed that they were not consulted when the government signed an agreement with a Brazilian firm to build a 320 km road linking Rupununt, near the Brazilian border, to the Guyanese capital of Georgetown.

Several tribes have launched the Amerindian People's Association (APA) to represent the cause of their people. They are aided by the Guyana Human Rights Association.

The conference warned that the crucial decisions Guyana has now taken are decisions for both land and people: either both survive or they disappear together.

The conference claimed that certain regions in Guyana were being exploited by local and foreign timber merchants and miners, who were depleting forest stocks reserved for

Amerindian communities. Uncontrolled mining, the declaration stated, was not only destroying natural resources and harming the environment but also having serious consequences on the moral and social life of the Amerindian people. It called on donor agencies to ensure that their money was used to develop and not destroy their land and peoples.

At the post-conference press briefing, Amerindian leaders said that the British, who were the country's colonial rulers, gave them the forest. They expressed their disgust at the way their communities were being invaded by coastalers and the threat posed to their heritage.

The Amerindians are worried about the effect on their young people of influences from coastalers. These were teaching Amerindian youths to smoke marijuana. They sold excessive alcohol to

them, thus contravening community regulations, and took advantage of young Amerindian women. Anglican Bishop Randolph George, co-chairman of the Guyana Human Rights Association, is urging that the well-being of the Amerindians and the environment in which they live should receive priority in any development plan.

In opening the Amerindian conference he said: "In the first place, forests and rivers are not simply resources for Amerindians, they are life itself. Secondly, because the interior is the only place Amerindian communities can survive, to migrate or be forced elsewhere is to die as a community".

Bishop George stressed that Guyana was at a crossroads. The country must choose between making profit at the cost of destroying both the environment and the Amerindian communities, or choosing to use resources in ways which recognise that vigorous Amerindian communities are the best form of conservation.

For its part, the administration of President Desmond Hoyte insists that it has done more for the Amerindians than either the British administration or the previous government of Dr Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP).

A government spokesman said it was the People's National Congress (PNC) government that gave Amerindians title to their lands, and that more schools and health facilities were built by the Hoyte government than by any other. The Amerindian population, he added, had increased from about 13,000 to about 45,000 as a result.

Amerindian leaders counter that by saying the government handpicks representatives for such communities, and these simply rubber-stamp government policies, often to the disadvantage of Amerindian communities.

The dissatisfaction about Amerindians of this side of the Amazonian rainforest is echoed in neighbouring Brazil, where some Amerindian tribes are fearful of extinction because planned development projects give little consideration to their well-being. — Gemini

Conflicts Arise Over Asia's Largest Forest

A tribesman in holds a bow taut, aims and releases an arrow into the heart of a young pig. Others wearing conical gourds on their genitalia gather around for the ritual skinning as Ali, a young guide, begins recounting days of turmoil and years of pain.

Over a decade ago, government helicopters strafed villages and pilots hit with poisoned arrows crashed to the ground.

"The men in our village brought down one helicopter and killed the pilot, but many villagers were killed," said Ali, who was then a young boy, but now works for a tour agency as a porter for US\$3 a day.

Even today, a clash of values between Asian administrators from other islands and Melanesian Papuans or "frizzy hairs" fuels an insurgency spearheaded by tribesmen with poisoned arrows.

As recently as 1979, new villages were being discovered in isolated jungle valleys of Irian Jaya, Indonesia's half of New Guinea. The Balim highlands near Wamena, considered by many anthropologists to be an ancient centre of advanced agrarian civilisation in Western New Guinea, were discovered by an American pilot in 1938.

Indonesian sovereignty over Irian Jaya is very much a product of the Cold War era.

In 1963, the Dutch government, giving in to pressure from American officials, agreed to allow the Indonesian military to take over Western New Guinea.

The Netherlands, claiming that it was preparing the colony for independence, gave in under pressure from US officials who feared that the Soviet Union was on the verge of funneling arms to the Indonesians.

Today's conflicts are mainly over the use of the 31 million hectares of forested land that represents Asia's largest pristine rainforest.

A world Wildlife fund report describes Irian Jaya as a "highly populated land of dense unbroken rainforest, grided by coral reefs and crystal waters."

The terrain ranges from

dense mangrove forests to an equatorial glacier, less than 100 miles inland.

Intellectuals and Western sources in New Guinea said in recent interviews that the government's attempts to corner resources and change the lifestyle of indigenous inhabitants are fueling an insurgency consisting primarily of angry natives with bows and arrows.

Formally known as the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) or "The Free Papua Movement", the rebel group kidnapped four missionaries, including an American in neighbouring Papua New Guinea in mid-November. The rebels demanded that Papua

A clash of values fuels an insurgency spearheaded by tribesmen with poisoned arrows

new Guinea drop its planned military cooperation with Indonesia.

The hostage-taking, the first of its kind in over a decade, appeared to be in response to the Indonesian government's recent announcement that its neighbour was returning 600 nominal refugee tribesmen who fled Western New Guinea in 1984 and had agreed to military cooperation.

Though another disaffected 10,000 civilians remain across the border, Papua New Guinea has reportedly agreed to permit Indonesian troops to cross its border in "hot pursuit" of rebels.

Local police officials downplay the threat of the OPM even in areas where they are known to have the greatest influence.

But political activists and some of the handful of intellectuals in Western New Guinea say the group has gained support since the respected and US-educated Dr. Thomas Wapal Wanggal shocked authorities by raising the OPM independence flag at a ceremony in 1988.

The Indonesian government claims that it is its task, a task it says it is carrying out on a daily

basis. Indonesians point out that they have brought education, health care and a formal legal structure in varying degrees to a land once largely devoid of such trappings of "civilisation."

In most cases, the Asian administrators have been preceded by Western missionaries who have been permitted to proselytise at will but often at the risk of their own lives.

The replacement of traditional myth and concepts of ritual warfare with Western notions of God and peace has helped lay the groundwork for Indonesian administrators, say locals.

But radical tribesmen and intellectuals in the capital say religion is merely an "opiate of the masses" used to subjugate locals.

"Religious values were forced on the people through a process of sedation," charges a recent report by a group of Jakarta-based political activists. "This gradually marginalised the indigenous value system which is the main element of indigenous culture."

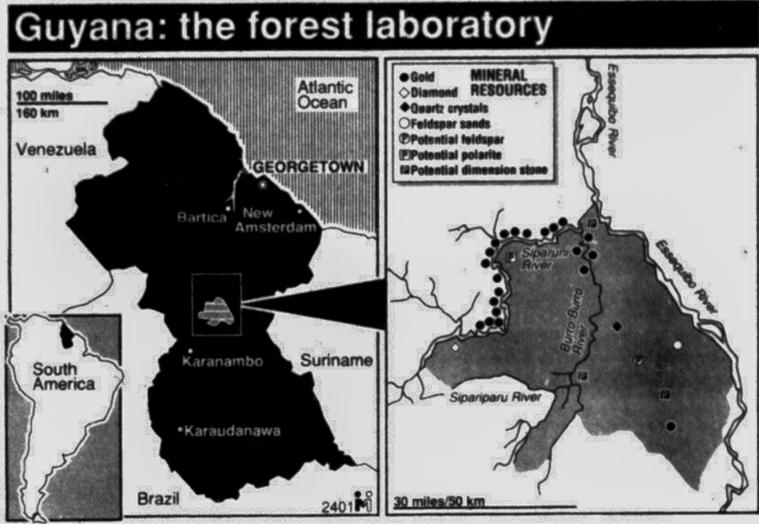
The same group claims that Asian administrators are often blatantly racist.

"Local teachers are passive," said an Indonesian official who spoke to. "Their traditions and culture have a negative impact on the children. The best teachers are outsiders. They bring a good influence to this region."

Supporters of the OPM point to past examples of land rights conflicts caused when the government handed over land of indigenous tribes to multinational firms, the most prominent being Freeport International, a US copper mining firm.

When Freeport experienced raids and attacks from Amungme tribesmen, accused by the Indonesian government of having been provoked by the OPM, Jakarta gave the firm authorisation to help organise the resettlement of native inhabitants.

More recently a Canadian firm, Ingold, has begun making good on contract to use hydraulic drilling techniques in the highlands near the Okasbil region. — Depthnews



Cars in Asia—at the crossroads

WHAT would happen if Asia converts its bicycles, pedicabs and walkways into passenger cars and motorways?

Asia is expected to increase its automotive ownership twice as fast as any other region.

About 80 per cent of all cars are now located in the industrialised world, which is reaching a saturation point. The future of widespread automotive ownership, then, is in the developing world.

The United States has one registered passenger car for every 1.8 citizens, compared

train thousands upon thousands of mechanics and import and refine millions of gallons of petrol.

As its population doubles over the next three-quarters of a century, India would have to be ready for a fleet of 1.6 billion cars — and the infrastructure and fuel costs that go along with them.

US-style car ownership in China today would represent 603 million cars. This is roughly one-and-a-half times the world's present car population.

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In 1988, for example, the United States spent nearly 10 per cent of its Gross National Product, or US\$462 billion, on the purchase and ownership of cars, including business-related use. Americans, according to the latest available figures, make about 70 per cent of all their home-to-work trips in their cars, compared with

only 4.6 per cent by public transportation.

The money Americans spend per year on their cars is roughly equivalent to the combined gross national products — or all the goods and services produced annually — of China, Pakistan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

The US spends nearly three times more on transportation than on education.

Widespread car ownership has a variety of collateral costs.

In both Europe and the US, deaths due to motor vehicles approach 50,000 annually. Car theft in the US now tops 1.4 million vehicles annually, or more than every single registered passenger car in China, Indonesia, Malaysia or the Philippines. In addition there are such crucial issues as petrol dependency, pollution and agricultural land lost to roadways.

Basic demographics illustrate the region's potential as a car market. Roughly six out of ten people on earth are Asian, a ratio that is expected to hold well into the 21st century.

No country anywhere approaches either China or India in population. Those two countries alone have slightly more than 2 billion of the world's current total population of 5.3 billion.

Further, Asia cannot count on stable population growth to moderate demand in the years

to come. Asia's declining fertility rate, the average number of children women will have during their childbearing years, in a statistical mirage at the moment. While the average woman is, in fact, having fewer children, so many more women are reaching childbearing years now and in the near future an unprecedented number of Asia children will be born.

"For the large countries of Asia," World Bank demographers recently noted, "the numbers of people added each

year are so large as to be difficult to visualise. India adds to its population every year as many people as live in Nepal or Australia, while the annual increase in Pakistan is equivalent to one-and-a-half Singapores."

By worldwide population standards, Bangladesh (114.5 million), Indonesia (190 million), Japan (124 million), South Korea (43 million), Pakistan (115 million) and Vietnam (70 million) represent huge markets.

World Bank demographers predict that Asia's 1990 population of roughly 3.1 billion people will reach 6.3 billion by 2075.

The expected doubling of the region's population within 85 years would create a population greater by one billion than today's world total.

The average Asian's desire for personal transportation, nevertheless, is manifest in virtually every nation. As a result, increasing modernisation brings many countries of the region to the proverbial fork in the road.

Will Asian countries try to fulfill the car wish? Or will the globe's most populous region try a mix of accessible public transportation and population control to balance aspirations with available resources?

The answer will go a long way toward deciding whether the world is to practice sustainable development.

Their advocates, Ray Wijewardene and P.G. Joseph,

— Depthnews Asia.

Greens Win Battle Against Coal Power Plant

Gamini Navaratne

ENVIRONMENTALISTS in Sri Lanka have won a major battle. President Ranasinghe Premadasa has given in to protests and directed the Power and Energy Ministry to abandon building a coal-fired power plant at Mawella on the south coast.

The move followed a mammoth debate by press and seminar on energy options for this Asian island. A powerful group of vested interests backed by several foreign countries had been lobbying for more than five years for the coal project.

Sri Lanka, like most countries, urgently needs to find extra energy sources for 21st Century technology.

The coal lobbyists argued that theirs was the best option, both in cost and output, and that foreign multinationals were willing to back the project.

Premadasa shot down the proposal and told the Power and Energy Ministry to seek viable alternative sources of energy.

The main argument of the environmentalists was that because Sri Lanka has no coal the project would have to rely on imports at a heavy drain of foreign exchange.

The better alternatives, they said, were to harness the remaining rivers for hydro-power, introduce solar energy, and build mini-hydro power projects using the many streams and bio-gas projects.

At present, the largest source of non-commercial energy — nearly 70 per cent — comes from fuelwood, agricultural residues and animal waste. Commercial energy is dependent mainly on electricity and petroleum.

The country's biggest river, the Mahaweli, provides most of the hydro-power, generating nearly 750 megawatts annually.

Another 270 megawatts comes from thermal plants.

Environmentalists argue that fuelwood is the most viable and appropriate alternative for the country, providing widespread local employment without saddling future generations with an increasingly massive import bill.

Their advocates, Ray Wijewardene and P.G. Joseph,

said in an article in a leading daily. The island, that 600,000 hectares of scrubland could conservatively produce 7.8 million tonnes of wood annually, equivalent to two million tonnes of oil.

They estimate this quantity of wood could generate electricity equal to the present annual consumption of hydro-power.

They also say small farmer participation is essential if fuelwood is to be effectively exploited. It would provide work for more than 200,000 families (on the 600,000 hectares

of scrubland alone), each with a sustainable income of Rs. 35,000 a year.

They say: "Such a programme for the comprehensive exploitation of the tree and wood potential of the country would be in the order of the magnitude approaching that of the gigantic Mahaweli river development programme but with a major difference: it will not require tremendous foreign investment and loans."

The article said that the Food and Agricultural Organisation's Forest Products Division, with experience in such programmes in several

Asian, Pacific and South American countries, was well-equipped to help.

As the prelude to the programme a massive tree planting campaign would be needed. The Premadasa government has committed itself to participatory forestry.

The target is the rural household and its associated land. Settlers in new land development schemes, especially in the north-central region, are to be given help to re-establish traditional tree cover and home gardens.

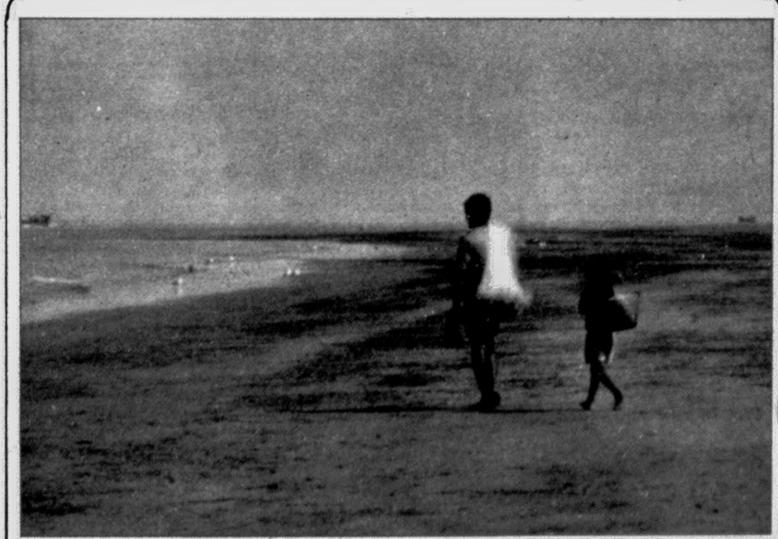
The Asian Development Bank has agreed to contribute \$14.3 million to the project.

The beneficiaries, the farmers, are expected to contribute \$5 million, mainly through their labour.

Another \$5 million in assistance is expected from international donors.

— GEMINI NEWS

[About the Author: Gamini Navaratne is a Sri Lankan journalist who runs his own agency in Colombo, Sandesa Press Agency. For several years he edited The Independent Saturday Review in Jaffna and now publishes it in Colombo.]



The Bay of Bengal and the coastal areas are struck by natural disasters from time to time. — Photo by S. Faruque