



National Development Strategy

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Forestry in Guyana

The National Development Strategy (NDS) points out that about 168,000 square kilometres, or more than 75 percent of Guyana's land area, are forested. Moreover, although many of the plant and animal species which abound in Guyana's forests are as yet unidentified, it is known that our forest ecosystems are a most significant reservoir of biodiversity. In addition, our forests protect our soils from erosion, regulate and purify our water supplies and, most important, ensure environmental stability. On top of all this, the forests yield wood and non-timber products which, if commercialized, could greatly assist the country's social and economic development. Indeed, the forest resources of the country can play an important role in transforming and developing our relatively uninhabited hinterland.

The NDS also notes that the forest industries sub-sector possesses characteristics which are capable of providing the economic stimulus which Guyana requires at this stage of its development: capital requirements of the sector range from very low to very high, technological requirements range from very simple to very sophisticated; and individual forest industries may be either labour or capital intensive. In other words, forest industries can be accommodated at any stage in the country's economic evolution, and can be profitable to both the moderately and well-endowed investor. Furthermore, the NDS asserts that the amenities which the forests provide and the richness of their flora and fauna are important for recreational purposes, for the enhancement of ecotourism, and for scientific research.

And yet, as has been hinted at in some of the articles which have already been presented in this series, the forestry sector's contribution to economic and social development in Guyana has not been as significant as the extent and nature of our forest resources might lead us to expect of it.

Indeed, the authors of the NDS view this failure to take the fullest advantage of the forest sector's potential with such dismay that they devote considerable attention to a description of the constraints which inhibit its development. They stress that the often outmoded harvesting practices which are followed in Guyana lead to the recovery of an insufficient number of timber species, require frequent entries to each forest site, and adversely affect both the economic and environmental stability of the forestry sector. As a result, logging costs are not infrequently inordinately high, the ecological conditions that are necessary for regenerating the required forest species are not created, and there is sometimes intense damage to the forests. It is acknowledged that, over the last five years or so, the Guyana Forestry Commission has introduced measures that are designed to ensure the sustainable management

of our forests. However, for a number of reasons, the quality of forest harvesting in Guyana is still remarkably low.

The authors of the NDS strongly hold the view that among the major reasons for the inadequate development of the sector are the low levels of efficiency in the utilisation of equipment, personnel and timber which generally prevail both in our forests, and in our wood conversion industries. This failure to optimise the use of these factors of production is mainly due to the relative unavailability of capital to modernize the sector, outdated managerial and technological practices, and a critical shortage of human resources. The fact that Guyanese possess a high tolerance for low-quality goods has also contributed to sloppy production.

Another constraint to the development of the forestry sector which has been identified in the NDS has been the reluctance of forest producers to take advantage of the multiplicity of potential uses of the forests which have been leased to them. For example, they have not attempted to combine timber production with, say, the utilisation and sale of lianes for furniture manufacture, and the reservation of part of the larger forest leases for ecotourism.

Moreover, the NDS notes that Amerindians have traditionally used the forests to produce a variety of goods such as plants for medicines, fibres, and fruit, and laments the failure of forest concessionaires to enter into partnerships with them for their mutual benefit. In this, as in so many aspects of Guyanese life, creativity and imagination seem to be in short supply.

Another issue which the NDS flags as a possible constraint to the orderly development of forestry in Guyana, is the hesitancy of the authorities to resolve the problems which arise from the recent increase in the use of chainsaws for the sawing of logs into lumber at the stump. Although chainsaw lumber operations lead to less environmental damage than commercial logging, the large number of individuals who are involved and the scattered nature of the activities make monitoring difficult. Moreover, the ability of the Guyana Forestry Commission effectively to manage the forest in the areas in which such conversion operations are prevalent is severely limited. In addition, there is strong evidence that large-scale timber wastage occurs in the process. This wastage is compounded by the often poor quality of lumber produced and by the additional costs which are of necessity incurred during the process of re-manufacturing.

The authors of the NDS hold the view that the State should not prescribe the level and type of technology which might be used in industrial or semi-industrial operations, provided that environmental laws and policies are not infringed. They are also acutely aware that chainsaw lumber production leads to the self-employment of a not insignificant number of small-scale entrepreneurs. Accordingly, they do not recommend the cessation of this type of activity, but put forward a strategy for its rationalization which will be described in the next article in this series.

A most serious constraint to the optimization of social and economic returns from Guyana's forests is the growing practice by a number of timber importing countries, under pressure from environmental lobbyists, to cease importing tropical timbers, arbitrarily and capriciously, if they are not satisfied that the forests from which the timber is being exploited are being sustainably managed. It is therefore essential that we manage its forests in a sustainable manner, that we ensure that such management practices are understood and appreciated by importing countries, and that we formulate credible and acceptable methods of

issuing our own certificates of sustainability.

This, however, is no easy matter. The basic requirements for the practice of sustainable forest management are information on the areas of forest and their location, the range of forest types, the composition of the forests by species, the rates of growth of different species under various logging intensities, the synecology of various forests ecosystems, and the antecology of different species. It is only with this kind of knowledge that limits to the size and species of tree which could be felled might be prescribed, and decisions made with respect to specific areas to be logged, with any hope of sustaining and optimizing production, while conserving the forests.

Guyana does not possess many of these essential data. A considerable amount of research therefore needs to be undertaken if the goal of sustainable management is to be attained. Perhaps the most intractable constraint, however, is our seeming inability to agree on a forest taxation system which would at one and the same time compensate the people of Guyana for the utilization of their forest patrimony, and provide the financiers with a fair return on their investment. This problem persists because very few independent studies have been undertaken on the costs of timber exploitation and extraction. Such an exercise should, however, be one of the main tasks of the Forest Research Centre at Iwokrama.

In next week's article, the strategy which the authors of the NDS have formulated for the sustainable development of the forest and forest industries sector in Guyana will be described in some detail. Suffice it to state at this stage that they are convinced that the development of the sector should not take place in a vacuum, but should be part of a comprehensive plan for the development of the hinterland. If this were done, not only would questions such as the extent and location of Amerindian lands, the nature and location of protected areas, and the provision of transport infrastructure and social services to interior communities be resolved, but the costs of forestry production would be inevitably reduced. ([Back to top](#))