

## **Sustainable Logging – Cohesive Action Needed**

While it may sound counter-intuitive, the logger is now the forest's best friend as far as eco-activists are concerned. That's right, logging – or harvesting trees from a forest for commercial profit – is now being embraced and applauded by the green community as a way to protect the world's forests. This change of heart is surprising to many, as logging has traditionally been thought to compromise forest eco-systems, endanger wildlife, alter soil nutrients, and disturb natural watersheds. However, in the past few decades, most ecologists have come to the conclusion that sustainable, eco-conscious logging is overall *better* for the environment than allowing forests and brush to sprawl at will. Only one problem remains: what constitutes "sustainable logging"?

A 2006 conference at Stanford University addressed the ambiguity of the term in an event entitled, *Sustainable Forestry in the West: Past, Present and Future*, by commenting, "Sustainable forestry has become the consumer-friendly watchword for many wood products companies with interests in the United States and Europe. However, the phrase itself remains nebulous, with competing definitions and certifications." Even the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, a group that champions ecologically responsible logging techniques, defines their goals vaguely as, "broaden sustainable forestry practices through procurement systems," "prompt reforestation to ensure long-term productivity," and "continual improvement of standards and practices." Not very informative on what constitutes a sustainable method.

Two of the most common logging techniques, clearcutting and selective logging, have vied in recent years for consideration as "sustainable logging," yet both have been met by the global community with a complex and confusing chorus of support and dissonance. The result? Though green logging has been a focus of many organizations and foresters for decades, there is still not consensus on how it should be done, leaving room for the continued abuse and mistreatment of the world's forest through illegal logging and lack of standardized procedures.

Yet it is easy to see why both practices have their followers and detractors. Clearcutting, commonly mistaken for deforestation, is responsible for one of the most familiar images of logging: the vast expanse of a once-forest that is now a barren, stump filled plane. It is the practice of clearing away all of the trees in a given location, leaving it devoid of vegetation and forest wildlife. For decades, this method of logging has been criticized because it totally changes the ecosystem around it, dislocates wildlife, and potentially affects the virility of the soil through over exposure and erosion.

Though it seems counter-intuitive, clearcutting land is actually a technique used by forest managers to rejuvenate withering or dead areas of forested land. The clearcut allows the soil to receive full and constant sunlight, allowing many sun-loving species an excellent habitat for growth. As far as wildlife is concerned, Kevin Belt, a West Virginian forester says, "The sum

total of wildlife is neither decreased nor enormously increased by a clearcut. To be more accurate, clearcuts *rearrange* habitat and wildlife population according to its age.” He further points out that a new clearcut is not hospitable to smaller animals, like squirrels and raccoons, yet is a great environment for bear, deer, and large game. However, the violent demolition of an ecosystem to rebuild it seems to work against the concept of being sustainable in many minds, and has kept clearcutting from losing a bad reputation of destruction.

What seems to be the opposite technique to clearcutting is selective logging. Selective logging is the practice of removing specific trees in a forest based on height and species, the thought being the wildlife and ecosystem will remain intact because full tree cover and forest population will not be lost. The Woods Hole Research Center, a well respected environmental group based in Massachusetts, sanctions selective logging throughout the northeast and its contributions to the environment, saying, “Selective logging is a less intensive form of forest harvest that minimizes forest disturbance.” The WHRC praises the International Paper Company of Maine for their use of selective logging, noting that their practice of harvesting wood decreases the amount of dead foliage that can increase greenhouse emissions and encourage growth due to less competition for resources. The government of Queensland, Australia, supports the practice as a positive and encouraged means on land management, saying, “It allows forest regeneration following and between selective harvests and results in a forest structure similar to a natural mix of tree ages.”

However, selective logging has fallen under serious criticism due to the destruction it is causing in the Amazon rainforest. Selective logging is seen as a gateway destructive practice, as it creates logging roads into the interior of forests leaving them accessible and vulnerable to other harmful human activities, like wildlife hunting and misuse of land. Furthermore, because one of the effects is to dry out the soil in the forest, selective logging has been linked to increased drought and wildfire vulnerability. In 2005, it was suggested that selective logging actually damages as many trees as full on clearcutting even though only a fraction of the trees are removed. Many critics of selective logging see it as a thinly veiled commercial initiative to mislead eco-activists into labeling it sustainable with the least amount of change required on their part.

With such drastic pros and cons to both practices, major global organizations, such as the Forest Stewardship Council, are ambiguous as to which should get their blessing. Their reluctance to choose a side has in many respects worked against the forests they try to protect, by allowing the real enemy in the eco-logging debate, illegal logging, to flourish due to lack of regulation. In recent years, illegal logging in the Amazon Rainforest has become a huge issue and a globally followed story. Illegal logging is responsible for much of the destruction and deforestation of the rainforest in Brazil, and recent reports suggest that the number of acres hurt by the practice is on the rise.

The solution needs to be an unbiased investigation into both clearcutting and selective logging techniques to ascertain which is really the greener; more sustainable option and what are other

options. It is been proven that current forestry organizations have an inability to come to a consensus on what is the best practice, and therefore require a third party to make the decision for them. Once the facts are collected, local, state, and federal governments need to be lobbied to establish laws that reward green logging techniques and punish other practices. Perhaps a system of tax credits, tax reduction, tax incentives could give loggers incentive to conform to new policies that would result in a major benefits to the sustainability of our planet.

