



Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation

Resolution on the Urgent Need To Curtail 'Special Agricultural And Business Leases' In Papua New Guinea

Whereas, Papua New Guinea (PNG) is among the most biologically and culturally diverse nations on Earth, sustaining about 850 distinctive cultural and linguistic groups; and

Whereas, PNG's diverse indigenous groups rely intimately on their traditional lands and forests in order to meet their needs for farming plots, forest goods, wild game, traditional and religious sites, and many other goods and services; and

Whereas, nearly all of PNG's land area is presently occupied or claimed by one or more of its indigenous communities, and the principles of strong indigenous land ownership are enshrined in PNG's national constitution; and

Whereas, over the past two decades, PNG has experienced a dramatic increase in industrial logging, mining, natural-gas projects and other large-scale developments; and the formal permission of a majority of traditional local land-owners is required under law for such projects to proceed; and

Whereas, efforts to reform the PNG timber industry, improve forest governance, and promote more-sustainable logging, developed in concert with the World Bank and other organizations, have attempted to impose limits on the granting of new timber leases in PNG; and

Whereas, Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLs), which were originally intended to promote local agricultural development, have been used on a large scale in PNG to circumvent forestry reforms by granting protracted (often 99-year) land leases, mostly to foreign or multinational corporations and logging interests; and

Whereas, abuses of trust with local indigenous communities have occurred far too often under SABLs, which greatly diminish the rights of traditional land owners for long periods of time; and

Whereas, in 2010 alone, 2.6 million hectares of SABLs were granted, all for 99-year terms, bringing the area of land alienated from customary owners in PNG to over 5 million hectares; and

Whereas, SABLs often appear to have been made without the prior knowledge and informed consent of a majority of customary land owners, as required under law, thereby alienating for several generations the lands on which they depend and have long relied; and

Whereas, authorizations to clear native forests, known as Forest Clearing Authorities, have already been issued for approximately 2 million hectares of forest in existing SABLs, much of which is of outstanding biological and cultural significance; and

Whereas, these Land-Clearing Authorities will promote the exploitation of native forests by foreign interests without requiring them to comply with existing forestry regulations in PNG; and

Whereas, SABLs are therefore a clear effort to circumvent prevailing efforts to reform the PNG forestry industry, which has long been plagued by allegations of weak governance and mismanagement, and are further being used to promote unregulated logging and other developments on an unprecedented scale within PNG while restricting the rights of traditional land-owners;

Therefore, be it resolved that the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC), the world's largest scientific organization devoted to the sustainable use and protection of tropical ecosystems, urges the Government of Papua New Guinea to:

1. Declare and enforce an immediate moratorium on the creation of new SABLs and Forest Clearing Authorities; and
2. Declare a temporary moratorium on the implementation of existing Forest Clearing Authorities; and
3. Immediately conduct a thorough, transparent, and independent review of the legality and constitutionality of SABLs and Forest Clearing Authorities in PNG.

With members from over 70 nations worldwide, the ATBC recognizes that raising the living standards of the people of Papua New Guinea is an urgent goal that will require the sustainable exploitation of the country's natural resources and the development of viable domestic industries. However, such development needs to be undertaken in sympathy with the customary landownership embodied in the PNG Constitution. It must also operate in concert with ongoing efforts to limit rampant and often predatory industrial exploitation of the country's forests, lands and other natural resources, which far too often fail to yield fair or equitable benefits for the majority of PNG citizens. This is the interest not only of the majority of PNG nationals, but also of those businesspeople who are presently operating responsibly in PNG.

The ATBC agrees with the need for sustainable economic development, and to achieve this a comprehensive land-use plan, based on participatory land-use agreements, is clearly needed. Only then can the sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits of Papua New Guinea's enormous natural wealth be secured for its people.