

The Cairns Declaration

The Alarming Social and Environmental Impacts of Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLs) in Papua New Guinea

In March 2011, a large group of environmental and social scientists, natural-resource managers and nongovernmental-organization staff from Papua New Guinea and other nations met at James Cook University in Cairns, Queensland, Australia to discuss the future management and conservation of Papua New Guinea's native forests. We reached a strong consensus on the need to halt the granting of Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLs).

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is among the most biologically and culturally diverse nations on Earth. PNG's remarkable diversity of cultural 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. Nearly all of PNG's land area is presently occupied or claimed by one or more of its traditional indigenous communities.

Papua New Guinea traditionally has had strong indigenous land ownership, which is enshrined in its national constitution. Over the past two decades, the country 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 for such projects to proceed.

Unfortunately, abuses of trust with local communities have occurred far too often, especially with respect to the SABLs. SABLs greatly diminish the rights of traditional owners for long periods of time while promoting industrial-scale logging, deforestation for oil palm plantations, or other extractive uses. Most of these industrial uses are dominated by foreign or multinational corporations.

In 2010 alone, 2.6 million hectares of SABLs were granted, all for protracted 99-year terms, bringing the area of land alienated from customary owners in PNG to over 5 million hectares. These Leases frequently appear to have been made without the prior knowledge and informed consent of the majority of customary owners, alienating for several generations the lands on which they depend and have long relied.

It is our understanding that government authorizations to clear native forests, known as Forest Clearing Authorities, have been issued for approximately 2 million hectares of forest in existing SABLs, much of which is of outstanding biological and cultural significance. We believe that these Authorities will promote the exploitation of native forest resources by foreign interests without requiring them to comply with existing forestry regulations in PNG. In this sense, SABLs are a clear effort to circumvent prevailing efforts to reform the forestry industry in PNG, which has long been plagued by allegations of mismanagement and corruption. They also are clearly designed to promote industrial developments on an unprecedented scale within PNG while diminishing the rights of traditional land-owners.

For these reasons, we urge the Government of Papua New Guinea to (1) declare and enforce an immediate moratorium on the creation of new SABLs, (2) halt the issuing of new Forest Clearing Authorities, and (3) declare a temporary moratorium on the implementation of existing Forest Clearing Authorities. These steps should commence immediately while a thorough, transparent and independent review of the legality and constitutionality of these Leases and Authorities is undertaken.

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, 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.

We agree 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.

Respectfully endorsed by:

Damien Ase

Executive Director, Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights (CELCOR), Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

William F. Laurance, Ph.D.

Distinguished Research Professor & Australian Laureate
Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation
James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Yati A. Bun

Executive Director, Foundation for People and Community Development in Papua New Guinea, Boroko, Papua New Guinea

Kenn Mondiai

Executive Director, Partners with Melanesians, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Vojtech Novotny, Ph.D.

Director, New Guinea Binatang Research Centre, Madang, Papua New Guinea

Colin Filer, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Rod Keenan, Ph.D.

Professor of Forestry, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Michael Bird, Ph.D., FRSE
Distinguished Professor and Federation Fellow, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Thomas Paka
Executive Director, PNG Ecoforestry Forum, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Nigel Stork, Ph.D.
Professor and Head of School, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

David Mitchell
Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea

Zachary Wells
Tree Kangaroo Conservation Programme, Lae, Papua New Guinea

Colin Hunt, Ph.D.
School of Economics, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Francis Hurahura
The Nature Conservancy: PNG, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Michael Wood, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Paul Winn
Greenpeace Australia Pacific, Sydney, Australia

Peter Hitchcock, Ph.D.
Founding Director (Emeritus), Wet Tropics Management Authority, Cairns, Australia

Andrew Krockenberger, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Quentin Reilly, M.D., DPH, MBBS
Specialist Health Consultant, Former District Health Officer, Manus Province, Papua New Guinea

Susan Laurance, Ph.D.
Tropical Leader and Senior Lecturer, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Damien Settle
Faculty of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Mark Baumgarten
Conservation International: Asia-Pacific, Cairns, Australia

Mark Ziembicki, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Researcher, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Ross Sinclair, Ph.D.

Director, Wildlife Conservation Society PNG Programme, Goroka, Papua New Guinea

Lance Hill, Ph.D.

Professor, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Michelle Venter, M.Sc.

Doctoral Candidate, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia