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Misguided foreign NGOs barking up the wrong tree

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THE adage goes like this: you can't see the trees for the forest. This saying, which may be older than some trees, seems to fall on deaf ears of certain quarters who claim to be champions of this natural resource.

Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from developed nations are over-reacting in the supervision and monitoring of other people's backyards. Their punishment of those who do not comply with their standards of forest preservation can lead to more harm than good.

Boycotting timber products, which they have unilaterally decided as being from unsustainable forests, is the in-thing for them. And of the various types of timber, the tropical variety has been singled out the most.

The situation was reported as quite serious in the European Union (EU), where the municipalities ignore their respective governments' decisions, and unilaterally campaign against tropical timber-based products.

Many EU countries are members of the International Tropical Timber Organisation (Itto). As signatories of the International Tropical Timber Agreement, they have all agreed on the year 2000 as the date for sustainability in forest management.

Unfortunately, this decision has not received wholesome support from the municipalities. They insist on certification or labelling of the timber-based products, which Itto has decided should only be carried out after the year 2000.

To the NGOs, giving the developing countries a hard time in selling their timber-based products is a means of encouraging these nations to follow their standards of sustainable forest management.

Perhaps the NGOs do not realise that there is always a possibility that a country, facing difficulties in obtaining revenue from forests as a result of this pressure, will in the end simply clear the forest and plant other agricultural crops.

Restrictions or boycotts of tropical timber does not only make these forests worthless as a source of income but also fails to reduce deforestation in developing countries.

At the 1998 International Timber Conference, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad hit the right button in his opening speech with regard to the reduction in the felling of trees and forest destruction.

He said the best way to reduce the felling of trees and destruction of forests is to ensure that every tree felled yields maximum returns. "The worst thing to do, if we want to minimise timber extraction, is to impoverish timber-producing countries."

Maximising the returns of every tree felled can be achieved by increasing the price of timber, by reducing the costs of extraction, and by adding maximum value before exporting.

If all this is done, then countries, which depend on timber for their economic development, need not extract timber in an unsustainable way.

As for developed countries, which at present are more inclined towards restricting tropical timber-based products, they can assume a more positive role against deforestation by providing greater market access.

This will subsequently put the producer countries in a better position to undertake sustainable management of their forests.

The global trade in forest products is estimated at US\$114 billion (US\$1 = RM4) and continues to increase in volume.

However, developed countries dominate this timber trade, accounting for about 80 per cent of it. The developing countries have entered this field but their share of the trade is still small.

Contrary to some NGOs' beliefs, the sustainable management of forests and the utilisation of timber products constitute fundamental components of the overall socio-economic development of many timber-producing countries.

It has been estimated that the total world forest cover in 1995, comprising natural and planted forests was 3.4 billion ha with 50 per cent of this located in developing countries and comprising mainly tropical forest.

The tropical forest cover has unfortunately declined from 1.79 billion ha in 1990 to 1.73 billion ha in 1995 as countries with tropical forests have recently been utilising these resources to gain revenue as they are largely poverty-stricken.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or Earth Summit, in 1992 highlighted the critical role of forests in environmental conservation and sustainable economic development.

This recognition was also reflected in international conventions such as the International Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Convention to Combat Desertification and the Framework Convention on Global Climate Change.

For sustainable forest management, countries will have to forego potential wealth and plough back considerable resources into the forestry sector. It is thus only logical that poor countries cannot be expected to do this unassisted.

Furthermore, if developing countries are to be entrusted with providing a carbon sink for the world, including the rich countries, it is only right that there should be cost-sharing between them and the wealthy nations.

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