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How global forest-destroyers are turning over a new leaf

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Bill Laurance receives funding from the Australian Research Council and other scientific and philanthropic organisations. In addition to his appointment as Distinguished Research Professor and Australian Laureate at James Cook University, he also holds the Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation at Utrecht University, Netherlands. This chair is co-funded by Utrecht University and WWF-Netherlands.



Changing corporate attitudes are giving orangutans and other endangered species in Indonesia's rainforests more hope of survival. Flickr/Austronesian Expeditions

Indonesia is the world's **biggest destroyer of forests** and four multinational corporations — APP, APRIL, Wilmar and Golden Agri Resources — have been responsible for much of it. Until recently these mega-corporations were considered environmental pariahs, but suddenly things seem to be changing, with all four proclaiming “no deforestation” policies. What gives?

A corporate revolution?

APP and APRIL are giant paper-pulp corporations. Collectively, they've cleared several million hectares of native Indonesian rainforest and other lands to grow fast-growing pulpwoods, turning the original rainforest into pulp in the process.

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Wilmar and Golden Agri Resources are the world's two biggest producers of palm oil — a **key driver of forest destruction** across the tropics, especially in southeast Asia.

Golden Agri Resources led the way, announcing a **no-deforestation policy in 2011**. Under growing pressure, its sister company **APP (Asia Pulp & Paper)** followed suit **early last year**.



Rainforest timbers stockpiled outside an APRIL pulp-processing plant in Sumatra, Indonesia.
William Laurance

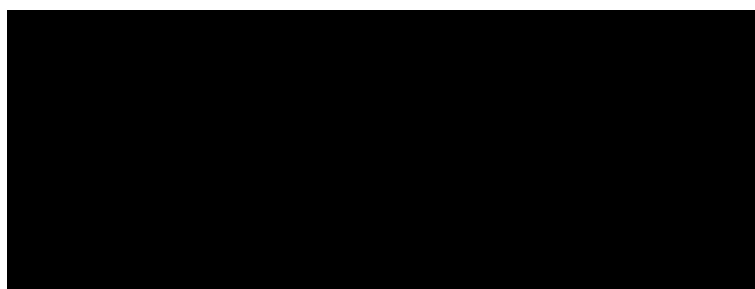
APP's metamorphosis was especially stunning. For years, APP had thumbed its nose at critics while bulldozing ever more forest. This was easy for it to do because APP is largely a privately held corporation and because countries such as China and India — which generally don't fuss too much about the environment — snapped up much of its pulp and paper products.

But gradually, the tide turned against APP. Its critics mounted, its reputation turned increasingly toxic, and it began to **lose more and more market share**. By this point, it had cleared vast expanses of native forest for plantations, and so had less need for more forest clearing.

Market pressure to change

So APP announced a radical change: a moratorium on forest clearing until all its lands could be systematically assessed, and then no further clearing of native rainforest or carbon-rich peatlands. In addition, it pledged to introduce safeguards for the rights of local and indigenous communities and to be far more transparent.

Initially, plenty of observers - myself included — were skeptical of APP. But, so far APP **seems to be passing muster**. Its efforts are not perfect, but forest clearing has fallen sharply and it is unquestionably being more open and forthcoming.



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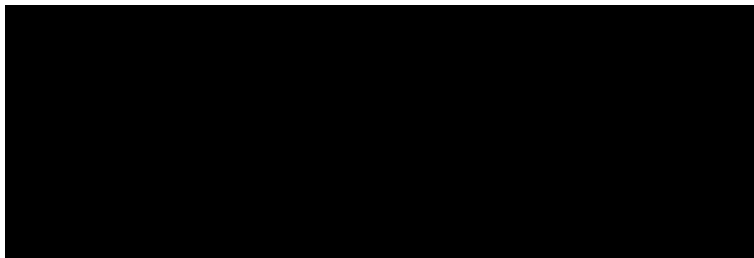
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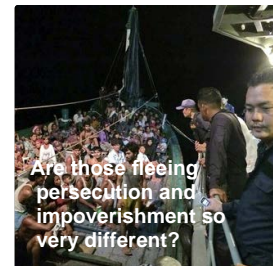
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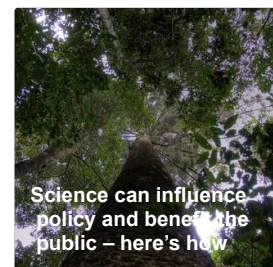


Asia Pulp & Paper now has a 'zero deforestation' policy.

Oil-palm giant **Wilmar** saw **the light next**. Its no-deforestation policy was announced just in December last year, so it's too early to say much yet. It claims it will immediately halt clearing of all forests and peatlands, and will not buy palm oil from anyone who does. Wilmar's global holdings are so vast that it will take time to implement its new policy and assess its benefits.



Last off the cab rank was **APRIL, or Asia Pacific Resources International Limited**. APRIL's policy was announced just a fortnight ago, on January 28, in what is widely being seen as an **attempt to steal the thunder from APP**, its longtime competitor, in the week before the **one-year anniversary** of APP's original no-deforestation pledge.



What are we to think about APRIL? On the one hand, APRIL has sought to go one better than APP by promising significant ecological restoration, initially to 20,000 hectares of native peatland in a key area of Sumatra, in addition to its other promises.

On the other hand, a close reading of its policies reveals that **APRIL will still fell some native forests** through 2014. Beyond this, it can continue to process rainforest trees and pulp from other suppliers until 2019. In six years, a lot of forest can fall before the bulldozers and chainsaws. And to make things worse, APRIL's new sustainability commitments won't be applied to other pulp-producing companies ultimately owned by the same family business.

For these reasons, APRIL's new policy clearly falls behind those of the other three big corporations.



Clearing of Sumatran rainforest for an APRIL wood-pulp plantation. William Laurance

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a global group of 200 major companies committed to sustainable practices, has placed **APRIL on probation** because of its deforestation practices. Having seen the fine print, WWF, which initially supported APRIL's new policy, now seems to be **rapidly backpedalling**.

What's the good news?

Despite those significant reservations about APRIL, all of these new policies still seem like a dramatic about-face for some of the world's biggest forest-felling corporations.

Even if we're dubious about their motives, their initiatives could represent an important wave of corporate realpolitik in our increasingly eco-conscious world. As such, they might become models for other natural resource-exploiting companies and business sectors internationally. Beyond this, the four corporations have large land interests globally, so one can't ignore the potential upside of their new policies alone.

Yet few doubt that there is still much to be done. APRIL, in particular, must raise its game. Too much evidence suggests its current approach is intended to muddy the waters and make its longstanding competitor APP seem less progressive.



Forest clearing for an APRIL wood-pulp plantation in Sumatra, Indonesia. William Laurance

And in the interests of full disclosure, I need to point out one of

my PhD students attempted three years ago to conduct research with APRIL. I toured their wood-pulp operations in central Sumatra, Indonesia, and later **criticised their deforestation policies on ABC TV's Foreign Correspondent** program.

APRIL demanded that I cease criticising them and sign a strict confidentiality agreement. I refused, and in response they effectively tossed out my PhD student, right in the midst of her doctoral research. As a result I hold little affection for APRIL. But I'd like to think I'm open-minded enough to give them credit if they make a genuine effort to turn over a new leaf.

At the end of the day, one has to see the actions of these mega-corporations in a hopeful light. Indonesia's rainforests are among the **biologically richest on Earth** and sustain **myriad endangered species**, including orangutans and tigers.

Thanks to public pressure, changing ledger sheets and the shifting attitudes of some corporate bigwigs, things finally appear to be improving. If we can sustain and build on these changes, those tigers, orangutans and countless species will have a better shot at long-term survival than they did before.

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Jim Inglis
retired

Thanks Bill for this tiny bit of light. We can only hope.

For many of the people and animals of course, it will be too late:

"We used to get resin, wood, timber, fuel from the forest. Now we have no option but to work for the palm oil company. The company beat us. The fire was deliberate. This forest was everything for us. We used it as our supermarket, building store, chemist shop and fuel supplier for generations of people. Now we must put plastic on our roofs," said one man from the village of Bayesjaya who also asked not to be named."

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