

Our forests becoming a source of shame

ONCE again, we as a nation are being shamed on the world stage of opinion. The latest outcry overseas against our forest practices should be taken seriously by our leaders. The report by non-government organisation, Forest Trends, touches on matters that are near and dear to our heart: legality, environmental sustainability, social and financial impact. The Washington-based group has zeroed in on the findings from the independent reviews of the timber harvesting industry, compiled between 2000 and 2005. Forest Trends points out that the studies were done with terms of reference approved by the Government and the World Bank. Unfortunately, the Government has done its best to ignore and shelve the reviews and the timber industry carries on, doing what it likes and with the open blessing of a government seemingly intent on raking in the revenue. It is common knowledge that the rural timber camps are a law unto themselves. Out of sight of the Waigani bureaucrats, they run their operations as they see fit. Police and other public servants who are supposed to deal with them find it is a fruitless task. The last minister who had the guts to stand up to the industry didn't last long. Who can argue with the statement that "Papua New Guinea's forest industry is predominantly focused on the harvesting of natural forest areas for round log exports". We are generally lauded as the owners of a land that is one of the biggest remaining stands of tropical timber in the world. Plenty of international attention has focused on the destruction of the Brazilian forests. Now it seems the world gaze is about to close in on PNG. Rightly so, too. It doesn't take much imagination to picture the carnage that can be wrought by the demands of the world's emerging powers, China, Korea and Japan. These countries are becoming the driving forces behind the older economies of Europe and the United States. If we are not careful, the demands for our timber will outstrip supply. If we are not replanting forests, there will come a day when it is no longer economic to exploit our forests. The raw forest will have gone, there will be no plantation timber developed to replace it and whole landscapes of our country will be degraded grassland. What will we have to show for it? Possibly, a lot of short-term roads and bridges reverting to bush, so-called health and education buildings that won't survive a decade or two . . . and exhausted bank accounts for the relative handful of landowners who are fortunate to receive royalties.