



global witness

# PARADISE LOST

How China can help  
the Solomon Islands  
protect its forests

OCTOBER 2018



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At first glance, the Solomon Islands looks like a tropical paradise with palm-fringed white sand beaches and pristine, biodiverse rainforests. It's advertised as being 'untouched' or 'unspoiled'.

But look closer and the paradise isn't so idyllic.

The last untouched wonder of the world.

**Solomon Airlines**<sup>1</sup>

These islands are laid-back, welcoming and often surprisingly untouched.

**Lonely Planet**<sup>2</sup>

Solomon Is. Unspoiled.

**Tourism Solomon Islands, the country's official tourist board**<sup>3</sup>

The islands remain unhurried, undeveloped, untouched and unspoiled.

**Hideaway Holidays**<sup>4</sup>

Tucked away in the South Pacific, the Solomon Islands are a little known, unspoilt paradise.

**Solomon Island Holidays**<sup>5</sup>

[The Solomon Islands] is one of the Pacific's last unspoilt destinations.

**Traveller**<sup>6</sup>



Our new investigation conclusively shows that tropical timber in the Solomon Islands is being harvested on an unsustainable scale, and that much of the activity driving this environmental destruction is at high risk of being illegal.

Through a combination of detailed research, satellite imagery, trade statistics, and on-the-ground and drone photography, we reveal the shocking pace and extent of the growing degradation of the Solomon Islands' tropical forests.

If this carries on unchecked, it will have a disastrous and irreparable impact on the country's environment, and our global climate, already pushed to danger point, will suffer the added burden of losing more of the world's carbon sinks.

The Solomon Islands is one of the poorest nations in the Pacific region.<sup>7</sup> The economy is heavily dependent on the forestry sector,<sup>8 9 10</sup> and yet the country's forests continue to disappear fast.<sup>11</sup> The Solomon Islands' authorities are well aware that, without change, the country's timber trade will soon slow to a trickle with nothing left to log and barely any timber to trade. The first step to prevent this from happening is to make sure that – at a very minimum – logging companies in the Solomon Islands comply with the country's laws.<sup>12</sup>

This is not a new problem, and this is not the first alarm bell. Despite constant warnings from landowners, parliamentarians, UN officials and academics, a lack of enforcement and a pervasive web of corruption continue to plough through the Solomon Islands, creating profit for a handful of individuals and abandoning accountability at the door. The Forestry Department has difficulty enforcing the law,<sup>13</sup> especially in the more remote parts of the country where some of the largest remaining forests are.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is highly unusual to see forestry officials outside the capital.<sup>15</sup>

**“We no longer have power to regulate; all we do is watch as the forest resource disappears.”**

**Job D. Tausinga, 2005,<sup>16</sup> later to be Solomon Islands Minister of Forestry<sup>17</sup>**

It is often argued that logging tropical forests is a good idea because it brings development to local communities. Essentially, that it is worth swapping trees for dollars; that logging brings development. Our research, however, revealed examples of how the timber trade in the Solomon Islands does little to benefit local communities.

**If this situation is going to change, the Solomon Islands needs China to act.**

Virtually all of the Solomon Islands' timber is exported to mainland China, and indeed this small group of islands are the country's second biggest source of tropical logs, after Papua New Guinea. The two countries supply half of China's tropical log imports.

China is taking serious steps to address environmental degradation and to reduce pollution and carbon emissions at home. At a national conference on environmental protection in 2018, President Xi Jinping reiterated China's goal of building an 'ecological civilization', leading in global climate governance; and drew links between a healthy environment and improved national security.<sup>18</sup> And in 2017 China extended a ban on commercial logging in natural forests so that it covered the whole of the country.<sup>19</sup>

But the Chinese government is overlooking an important aspect of its ecological footprint: the raw materials that it consumes from overseas. It is the destination for about two-thirds of all tropical logs globally, many of which come from countries like the Solomon Islands that are struggling to address governance and rule of law issues.<sup>20</sup> While the country has enacted 'Green Supply Chain' policies to reduce waste and pollution in domestic manufacturing sectors, these do not yet require commodities sourced from abroad to be legal and sustainable.<sup>21</sup>

This report and our previous analysis of Papua New Guinea show that 50% of China's tropical logs come from countries whose forest sectors are plagued with risks of illegality. If China continues to buy its wood with 'no questions asked', it risks undermining efforts by its trading partners to improve governance, prevent environmental degradation, and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The innovative steps that China is taking to reduce its own carbon emissions will be undermined if it continues to buy so much tropical wood from the Solomon Islands. Indeed, 77% of the Solomon Islands' greenhouse gas emissions come from forestry and land-use changes.<sup>22</sup> By not questioning the illegal activity businesses are taking part in, China enormously increases the commercial and reputational risks to its businesses and those they trade with. **We call on China to require its timber importers to carry out checks to ensure that the timber they buy is, at a minimum, legal in its country of origin.**

Time is running out for China – both to protect the forests of the Solomon Islands it profits from, and its position as a leader and pioneer on the global trade and environmental landscape.

This report unpacks:

### CHAPTER 1 UNSUSTAINABILITY

How the rate of logging in the Solomon Islands is massively unsustainable, including a new analysis that maps all the logging roads in the country

### CHAPTER 2 COMMERCIAL AND LEGAL RISKS TO BUSINESS

How the timber from the Solomon Islands is at a high risk of being illegal

### CHAPTER 3 LOGGING AND DEVELOPMENT

How the timber trade in the Solomon Islands does little to benefit local people

### CHAPTER 4 CHINA'S ROLE

How China, as the main importer of logs from the Solomon Islands, has a responsibility to act

### CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What the Solomon Islands and China could do to stop these problems

## Key facts

- The Solomon Islands is China's second-biggest source of tropical logs (after Papua New Guinea), despite the fact that the Solomon Islands is only twice as big as Beijing.
- The Solomon Islands exported more than 3 million cubic metres of logs in 2017, more than 19 times a conservative estimate of the annual sustainable harvest.
- A recent report commissioned by the Solomon Islands' Ministry of Finance suggested that if logging activities continue at their current pace, natural forests will be exhausted by 2036.
- Our new satellite imagery analysis shows that logging roads in the Solomon Islands are twice as long as the Yangtze River. In other words, logging roads in the Solomon Islands would take you from Shanghai to the Tibetan plateau and back again, despite the fact that the Solomon Islands are 338 times smaller than China.
- China imports 82% of the logs the Solomon Islands exports.
- About half of China's tropical log imports come from the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. We found high risks illegalities in both countries' forest sectors.
- The risks of illegal logging in the Solomon Islands are high enough that importers of uncertified Solomon Islands timber in the US and EU are unlikely to be able to meet their legal requirements without extensive site visits. Very few US or EU companies import timber direct from the Solomon Islands, but it is likely that companies importing timber from processing countries – principally China – may be importing Solomon Islands timber.
- More than half of the lowland<sup>a</sup> regions in the Solomon Islands is within 1 km of a logging road.
- One in every 20 km of logging road in the Solomon Islands is above 400 m in altitude, despite the fact that the Forest Act attempts to restrict logging in these areas by requiring companies to apply for special permission to log there.
- In 2017, the China Chemical Fibre Company and Jiangsu Modern Logistics each imported more than four times the amount of timber as the Solomon Islands can sustainably harvest.

<sup>a</sup> Logging is prohibited over 400 m elevation unless special permission is granted which is why we excluded these areas. Indeed, where the mountainsides are steep, logging over 400 m is likely impossible without the use of helicopters.

# 1. UNSUSTAINABILITY

The Solomon Islands' forests are being cut down at an unsustainable rate

The first chapter in our investigation into the Solomon Islands uses satellite imagery and trade data to reveal how forests across the islands are being logged at nearly twenty times the sustainable rate.



Satellite image of forests of Choiseul Province, showing a profusion of logging roads and logged areas, May 2018. Latitude -7.157, longitude 157.132

Logging roads smother the Solomon Islands, disrupting the tourist board myth that the country is 'untouched' or 'unspoiled'. Indeed, 53% of the country that's less than 400 m in altitude is now within 1 km of a logging road. Logging is prohibited over 400 m elevation unless special permission is granted, which is why we excluded these areas.

The extent of the logging is such that the country's natural forests are predicted to be commercially exhausted soon. In 2009, official bodies were already discussing whether all logging should be stopped. Nearly a decade later and the Ministry of Finance has suggested that there will be no more trees that are economically viable to cut down in the Solomon Islands by 2036.

The unsustainable logging of the Solomon Islands' once pristine rainforests not only has ominous economic implications but also devastating environmental consequences in terms of biodiversity loss and climate change.

This chapter uncovers the evidence that logging in the Solomon Islands is unsustainable:

- A network of 12,613 km of logging roads covers much of the Solomon Islands, revealing quite how widespread the logging is. Indeed, 12,613 km of logging roads is almost exactly twice the length of the Yangtze River, the longest in Asia.
- The Solomon Islands exports an astonishing 19 times more timber than is sustainable, yet despite this, the rate of logging is still increasing. Our estimate of sustainability is the most recent we can find, and comes from a report commissioned by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- The Solomon Islands' natural forests are predicted to be commercially exhausted soon.

## 1. A NETWORK OF LOGGING ROADS COVERS MUCH OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

We found that an astounding 53% of the Solomon Islands below 400 m altitude<sup>b</sup> is within 1 km of a logging road.<sup>23</sup> Being so close to a logging road makes the forest easily accessible by logging machinery and therefore vulnerable to logging. Residential roads within towns and roads within plantations are not included in our analysis.

We mapped a total of 12,613 km of logging roads, of which 11,944 km were below 400 m elevation and 669 km were above 400 m elevation. To put this into

perspective, logging roads on the small Solomon Islands are twice the length of the Yangtze River which runs all the way from the Tibetan plateau to the East China Sea.<sup>24</sup>

To calculate the length of logging roads on the Solomon Islands, we mapped all roads using satellite imagery, then filtered out residential, public and plantation roads by a) using existing OpenStreetMap road classifications, b) excluding Honiara from our analysis and c) doing a visual search of the data for residential and plantation roads.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 1: The total length of the logging roads in the Solomon Islands is about the distance from Shanghai to the Tibetan plateau and back. The rate of logging is so unsustainable that the Islands' natural forests are predicted to be commercially exhausted soon.**

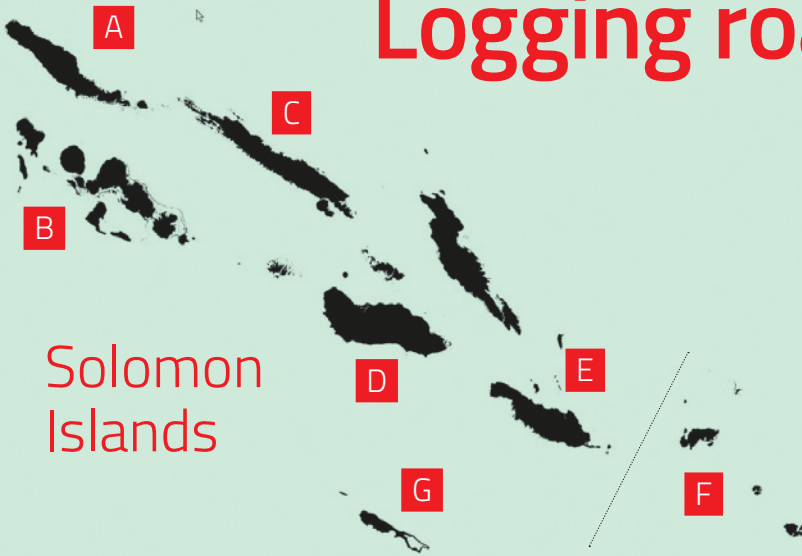
Worldwide, 95% of forest loss occurs within 50 km of a road.<sup>26</sup>

The presence of logging roads has wide-ranging consequences. Once a previously inaccessible forest is opened up by loggers, it is accessible for both legal and illegal logging, but also paves the way for poachers and people in search of land. Forest near a public road, especially in a country that struggles to enforce its forestry laws, is unlikely to remain as an intact forest for very long.

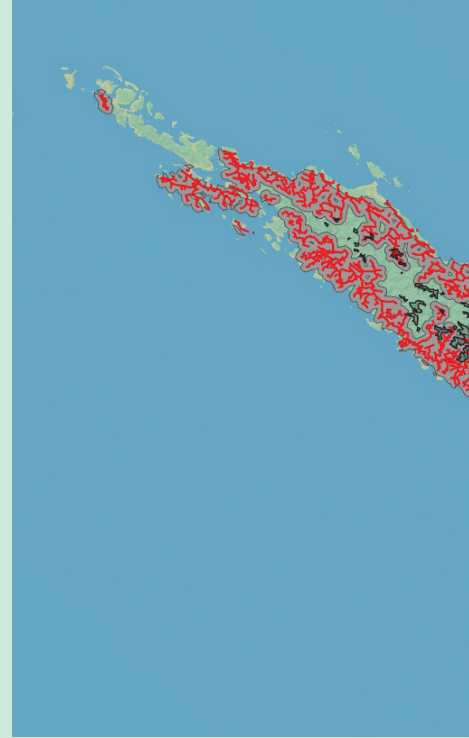
<sup>b</sup> Logging is prohibited over 400 m elevation unless special permission is granted which is why we excluded these areas. Indeed, where the mountainsides are steep, logging over 400 m is likely impossible without the use of helicopters.



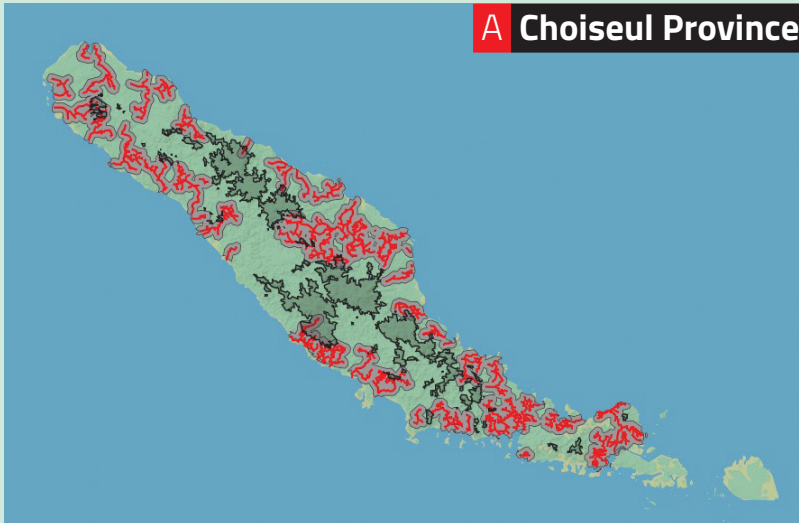
# Logging roads in the Solo



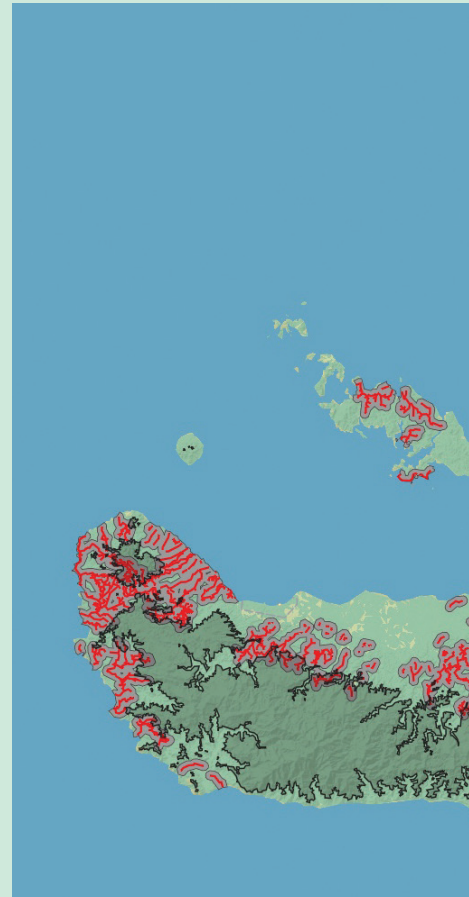
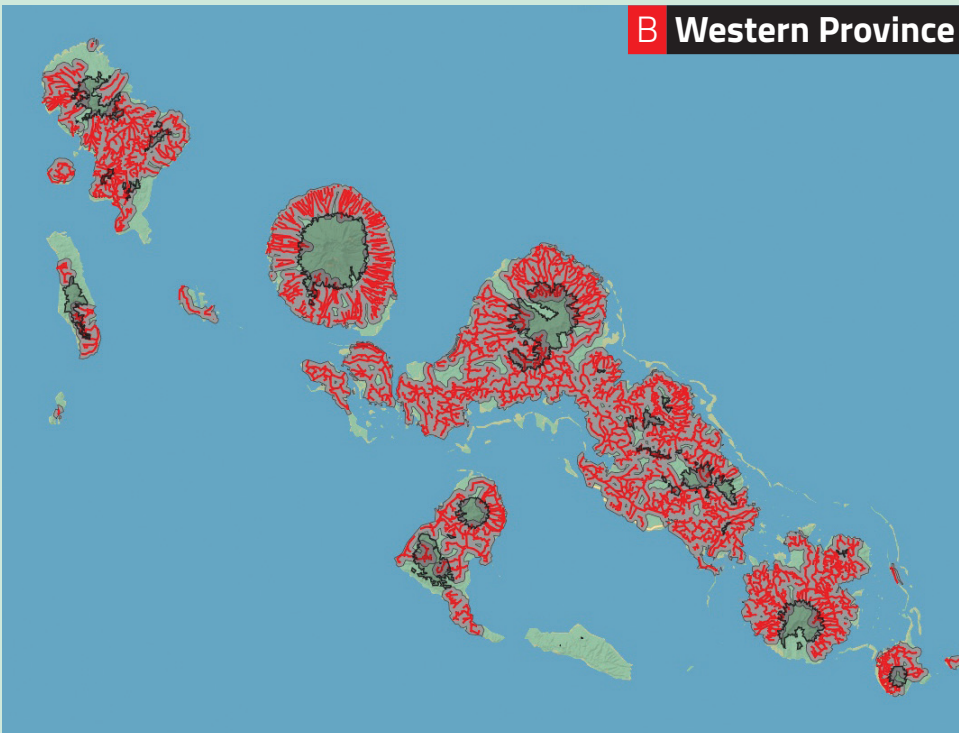
Solomon Islands



**A** Choiseul Province







**B** Western Province





# mon Islands

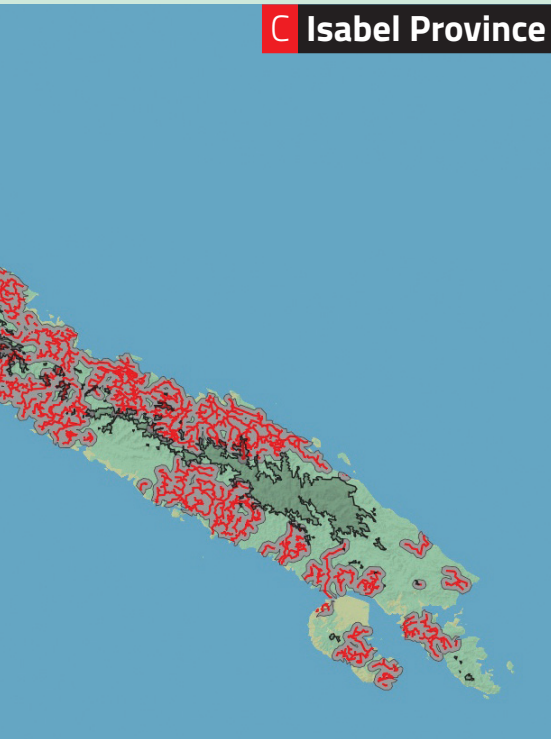
## KEY

-  Logging roads
-  Area within 1 km of a logging road
-  400 m elevation, beyond which logging is not normally allowed
-  Area above 400 m elevation, where logging is not normally allowed

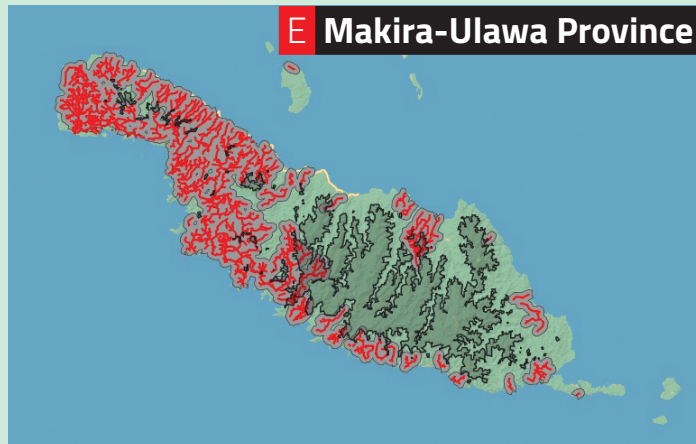
## SCALE

30 km
20 miles

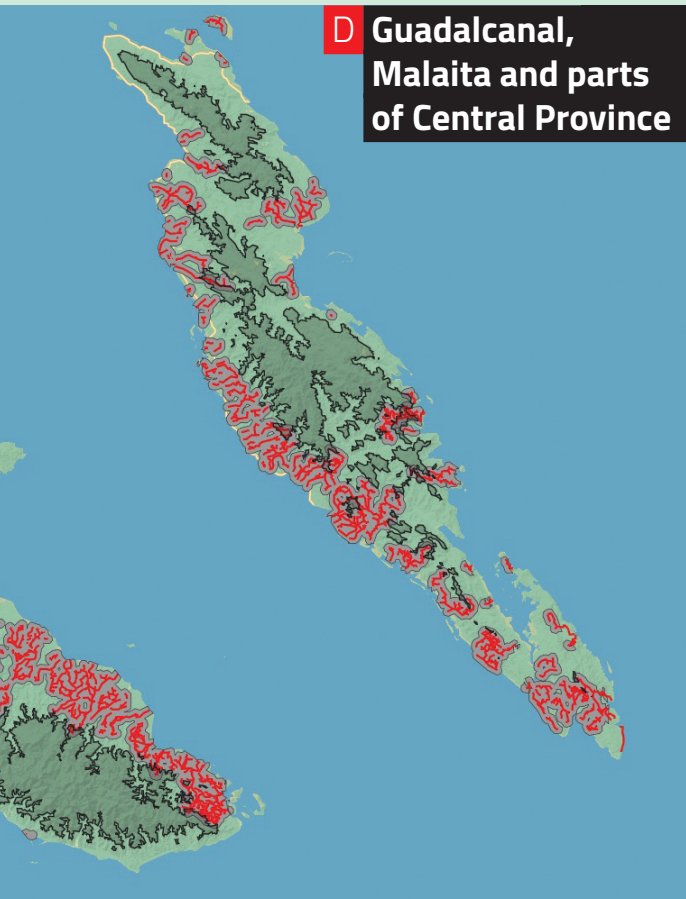
**C** Isabel Province



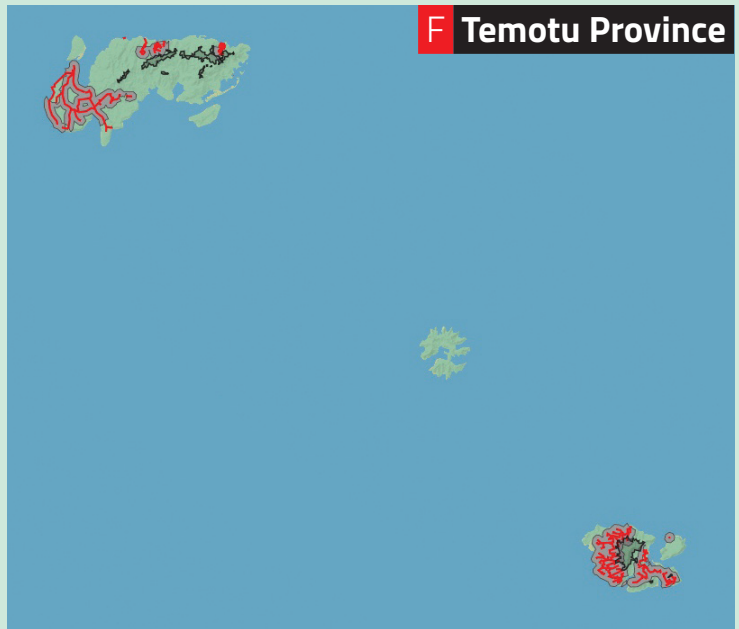
**E** Makira-Ulawa Province



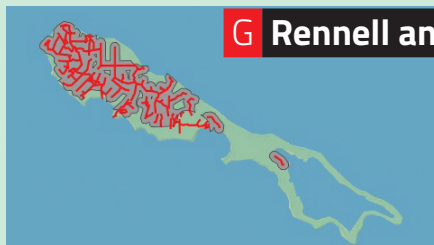
**D** Guadalcanal, Malaita and parts of Central Province



**F** Temotu Province



**G** Rennell and Bellona Province



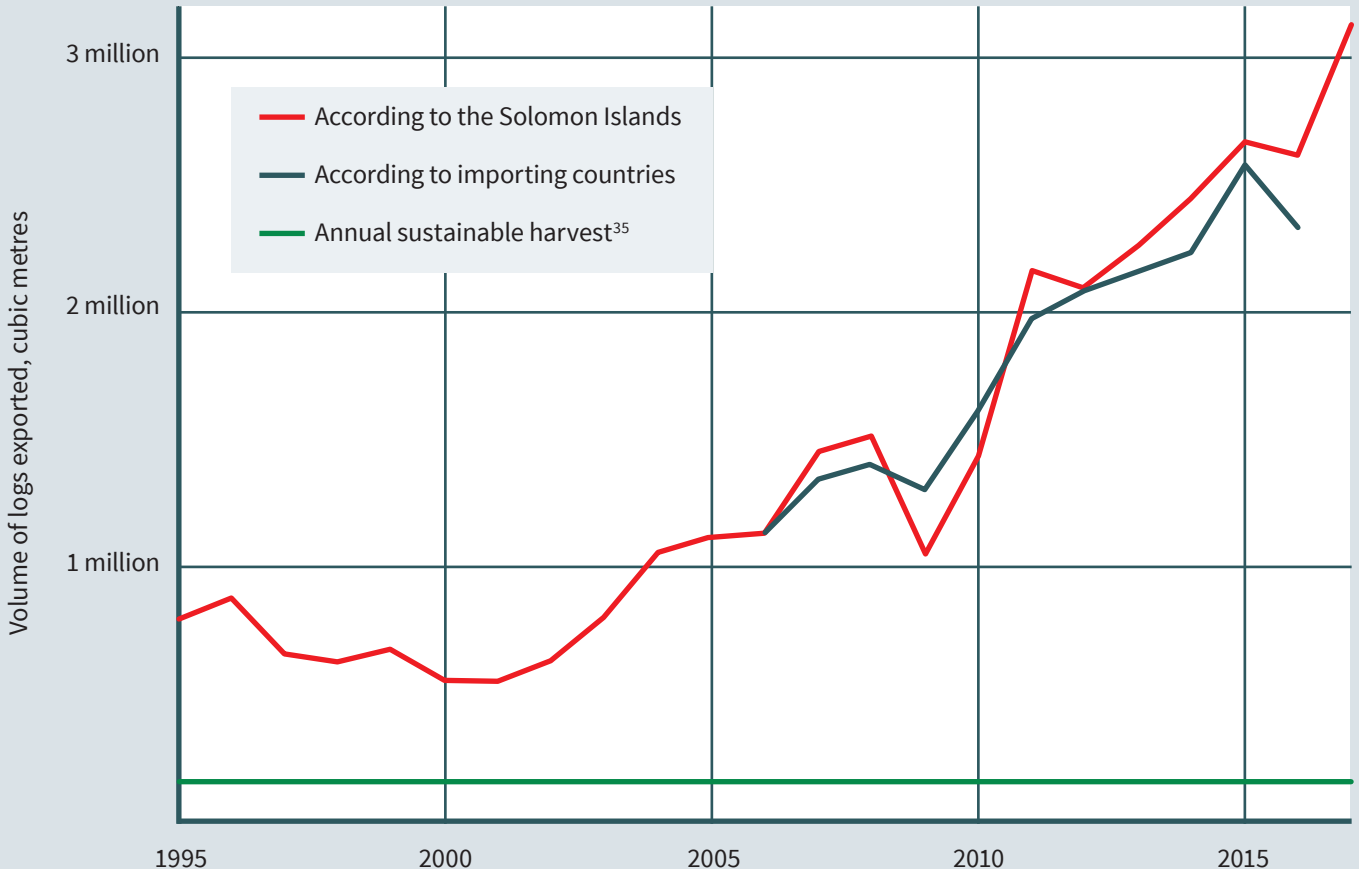
## 2. THE SOLOMON ISLANDS EXPORTS MORE THAN 19 TIMES THE ANNUAL SUSTAINABLE HARVEST, YET LOGGING IS STILL INCREASING

The volume of timber exported from the Solomon Islands has been increasing ever since the early 2000s. In 2017, the Solomon Islands exported more than three million cubic metres of logs,<sup>27</sup> more than 19 times what the annual sustainable harvest is conservatively estimated to be.<sup>28</sup>

To visualise how big three million cubic metres is, imagine the Olympic stadium in Beijing (The Bird's Nest), the world's largest enclosed space, entirely full of timber.<sup>29</sup>

The Solomon Islands government is well aware of the estimates of the annual sustainable yield: one comes from a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization that was commissioned by the government; one has appeared in reports of the Solomon Islands' Central Bank;<sup>30</sup> and another from the Ministry of Forestry and Research's own website, which not only acknowledges that the sustainable harvest is 250,000 cubic metres a year, but also acknowledges that the rate of harvest substantially exceeded this in 2005.<sup>31</sup> The most recent estimate of the annual sustainable yield, and therefore the one we use here, is 155,000 cubic metres a year.<sup>32 33</sup>

**Figure 2: The volume of logs exported from the Solomon Islands, 1995-2017, according to the Solomon Islands' own figures and figures of the importing countries<sup>34</sup>**



### 3. THE SOLOMON ISLANDS' NATURAL FORESTS ARE PREDICTED TO BE EXHAUSTED SOON

The level of unsustainable harvesting is such that it is estimated that all natural forests in the country that are accessible to logging companies – i.e. not on a steep mountainside – will soon be commercially exhausted.<sup>36 37 38</sup> In other words, there will be no more timber left that logging companies consider economically viable to harvest. A recent report commissioned by the Ministry of Finance suggested that if logging activities continue at their current pace, natural forests will be exhausted by 2036. Even if the rate of logging was halved they would still be exhausted by 2046.<sup>39</sup> We have not measured the size classes of different species of tree in different places in the Solomon Islands and therefore cannot give our own estimate of when there may be no more trees left that logging companies consider worth cutting down. However, what we can say is that any graph of log exports that has an exponential curve such as the Solomon Islands' does, cannot help but run out of trees soon.

The Solomon Islands' parliamentary Public Accounts Committee looked into this issue in 2009, raising concerns that too many logging licenses were being issued with insufficient regulatory control and raised the question as to whether the logging should be immediately stopped.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this, the logging continues, with logging in areas that have previously been logged (known as re-entry harvesting) now increasingly common.<sup>41</sup> In Western and Isabel provinces it is reported that trees as small as 15 cm diameter are being cut.<sup>42</sup> Re-entry logging is a problem both from an environmental and a commercial point of view as it likely doesn't give the forests enough time to recover before being logged again. It is likely a sign that logging companies are increasingly desperate in their search for more trees to cut down. The Solomon Islands has no laws or policies regulating re-entry logging.<sup>43</sup>



Satellite images of forests of Choiseul Province, showing the spread of logging roads and logged areas between 2016 and 2018



Satellite images of the forests of Nendo Island, Temotu Province, one of the remotest places in the Solomon Islands showing the spread of logging roads and logged areas between 2016 and 2017



Satellite images of Guadalcanal Province, the island on which Honiara, the country's capital is located, showing the spread of logging roads and logged areas between 2017 and 2018



## 2. COMMERCIAL AND LEGAL RISKS TO BUSINESS

Timber from the Solomon Islands is at high risk of being illegal

Photographs captured on-the-ground and from drones, along with desk research, have exposed the high risk of illegality of logging in the Solomon Islands. These are well-documented and include:

- The risk that timber is cut down without obtaining permission from the landowners.
- The risk that logging companies cut down more trees than they're allowed, species they're not allowed to cut and/or in areas they're not allowed to cut.

The timber is not just at risk of being illegal in the Solomon Islands, but also in countries that have laws requiring importers to check whether timber was legal in its country of harvest. This includes the US, EU, Australia and other major consumers of timber products. The risks of illegality are high enough that without extensive site visits, European and American importers are unlikely to be able to satisfy their legal due diligence requirements. This means buying timber from the Solomon Islands is a legal risk for companies in the US and EU and a commercial risk for companies in manufacturing countries such as China that sell to companies in the US and EU.

A recent example illustrates the stark reality of these connections: a giant American flooring retailer, Lumber Liquidators, was found guilty in relation to flooring imports from China using illegal wood and fined millions of dollars in criminal charges.<sup>44</sup>

This chapter uncovers the evidence that timber from the Solomon Islands is at high risk of being illegal:

1. There is a high risk that local landowners' permission is not legally sought.
2. There is a high risk that companies log outside their concession boundaries and fell more trees than allowed.
3. There is a high risk that companies log in prohibited places and harvest protected species.
4. There is a high risk that companies do not conduct environmental impact assessments.
5. There is a high risk that logging companies do not comply with legal requirements around maps.



In 2018, logging company Xiang Lin was accused of logging in Temotu, Santa Cruz Province without having held a timber rights hearing and the courts imposed an injunction on the company. This photo shows logging near Graciosa Bay, Temotu, Santa Cruz Province in an area said to be logged by Xiang Lin.<sup>45</sup> July 2018, latitude -10.678, longitude 165.935 ©Alessio Bariviera

## 1. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT LOCAL LANDOWNERS' PERMISSION IS NOT LEGALLY SOUGHT

Land in the Solomon Islands belongs to the people who live on it, and there are a number of measures in place to ensure that those people are able to decide who can log on it. However, our investigation has unearthed a wide range of evidence to suggest that logging companies are not legally seeking local landowner permission.

In some cases it is the timber companies that pay for this process, including paying allowances to the provincial officials that take part in the Timber Rights Hearing.<sup>46 47 48</sup> According to the UN Environment Programme this creates a conflict of interest by encouraging officials to align their views with those of the logging company.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, it is the timber companies that pay for the Timber Rights Hearings,<sup>50</sup> with allegations that landowners who agree to logging being carried out are financially compensated by the logging company to attend the Hearing, whereas people who oppose logging are not.<sup>51</sup>

The meetings in which it is decided whether landowners consent to logging taking place are funded by logging companies.

There are multiple reports that the Timber Rights Hearings do not proceed as they should. The Solomon Islands branch of Transparency International reports that “the whole process of Timber Right[s Hearings] is usually corrupted” and that it receives frequent complaints about inadequate notice being given for the Timber Right Hearings.<sup>52</sup>

Leading anti-corruption expert Rick Messick reports that “a common pattern is for a company to find one or more local chiefs or other community leaders willing to take bribes in the form of ‘good will payments’ and ‘advances’”.<sup>53</sup>

An academic at the Australian National University reports that logging companies are known to pressure landowners’ leaders by taking them to the capital, away from their community, and plying them with food and drink.<sup>54</sup> Both the incidence and the scale of these issues are reported to have increased recently.<sup>55</sup>

In 2013, the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association accused the logging company Viuru Forest Enterprise and its subcontractor Xiang Lin (SI) Ltd of logging without having held a Timber Rights Hearing. They successfully obtained an injunction to halt the logging until the courts could decide whether the granting of the timber licence was valid.<sup>56 57 58</sup> The injunction was lifted in October 2013.<sup>59</sup> Gordon Darcy Lilo, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands between 2011 and 2014,<sup>60</sup> was appointed as a director of Viuru Forest Enterprise in 2015.<sup>61 62</sup>

In 2018, communities in Santa Cruz, Temotu Province, accused the logging company Xiang Lin (SI) of logging without having held a Timber Rights Hearing. They successfully obtained an injunction to temporarily halt the logging which the Solomon Star reports they partially ignored.<sup>63 64</sup> The injunction was lifted in January 2018.<sup>65</sup>

The law requires that in order to log:<sup>66 67</sup>

- The logging company must apply to the Commissioner of Forests for permission to negotiate with the customary landowners (where the land is owned customarily, as is normally the case).
- The Provincial Executive must publicise a date and place for a Timber Rights Hearing.
- The Provincial Executive must hold a Timber Rights Hearing,<sup>c</sup> attended by the logging company, customary landowners and provincial forestry officers. If one or more landowners does not want the logging to proceed or if there is a disagreement as to who the landowners are, then the Provincial Executive should recommend that the logging does not proceed and the Commissioner of Forests should reject the logging company’s application.
- Landowners not happy with the determination of the Provincial Government must be able to appeal the decision of the Timber Rights Hearing at the Customary Land Appeal Court within one month of the meeting.

We contacted Viuru Forest Enterprise, Xiang Lin and Mr Lilo using the companies’ official contact details on the Solomon Islands’ corporate registry to put these allegations to them, but the letters and emails were not opened and no-one answered the phone.

It is clear from this evidence that logging companies in the Solomon Islands often do not seek local landowners’ permission to log on their land in the manner required by the law.

c Also referred to as a Timber Rights Meeting

## 2. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT COMPANIES LOG OUTSIDE THEIR CONCESSION BOUNDARIES AND FELL MORE TREES THAN ALLOWED

The UN Environment Programme reports that there are significant problems with companies logging outside their allocated concessions, quoting research that found that 36,000 hectares of forest had been illegally cut outside concession boundaries between 2005 and 2011.<sup>68</sup>

Thomson Reuters Foundation reports a forester from Western Province claims that there are ‘many cases’ of companies breaching their license conditions, including harvesting more trees than allowed. They cautioned that

limited government resources made it difficult to monitor the companies’ behaviour.<sup>69</sup>

Logging outside concession boundaries is a serious breach of a company’s permission to log. It means logging in areas that may belong to different landowners who will not have given their consent to log; it may mean logging in environmentally sensitive areas – and it effectively amounts to stealing timber.

## 3. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT COMPANIES LOG IN PROHIBITED PLACES AND HARVEST PROTECTED SPECIES

The Forest Resources and Timber Utilisation Act prohibits companies from logging above an altitude of 400 m unless they have permission from the Commissioner for Forests. In 2010, a local conservation group, the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association, obtained a court injunction against the logging company Success Company and its subcontractor Xiang Lin (SI) to prevent them from logging at an altitude above 400 m.<sup>70 71 72 73</sup> Heinz Horst Bodo Dettke who at the time was the Solomon Islands’ minister for forests<sup>74</sup> is a director and 60% shareholder of Success Company.<sup>75</sup> We contacted Success Company, Xiang Lin and Mr Dettke using the companies’ official contact details on the Solomon Islands’ corporate registry to put these allegations to them. Success Company and Mr Dettke did not reply; the letter and email to Xiang Lin were not opened and no-one answered the phone.

When we mapped the logging roads in the Solomon Islands, we found that 5% of the roads (669 km) were above 400 m elevation. Provisions within the Forest Act restrict the amount of logging over 400 m elevation. We do not know whether permission was sought and granted for the construction of these roads and therefore do not know whether they are legal or not.

The Solomon Islands Code of Logging Practice applies to all forest harvesting operations in the country. It sets standards such as how to build logging roads including how wide they can be and how close they can be to the sea, streams and gullies.<sup>76</sup> Such standards matter as they are designed to minimise disturbance to the forest ecosystem, ensuring that, for example, the silting up of streams – something that is an issue for people living further downstream – is minimised. A 2015/16 study about natural resource extraction on the Solomon Islands found that logging companies typically ignore this code<sup>77</sup> and according to the UN Environment Programme trees are often illegally harvested from river banks.<sup>78</sup> Satellite imagery and photos we obtained support these claims.



A logging road on Guadalcanal Island, 30km south-west of Honiara that breaches the logging code of practice by running too close to a stream. The code of logging practice states that the area 25 m either side of a small stream and 10 m either side of a gully are to be excluded from logging. Streams are defined as flowing for more than half the year and gullies as flowing for less than half a year. The road clearly runs closer than 10 m. 29 July 2018, latitude -9.601, longitude 159.743



A logging road in Temotu that breaches the logging code of practice by running too close to a stream. The code of logging practice states that the area 25 m either side of a small stream and 10 m either side of a gully are to be excluded from logging. Streams are defined as flowing for more than half the year and gullies as flowing for less than half a year. The road clearly runs closer than 10 m. July 2018, latitude -10.678, longitude 165.934 ©Alessio Bariviera





Aerial photo of logging activities in Choiseul Province. The code of logging practice forbids any logging within 100 m of the high-tide mark of the sea and this picture clearly shows that logging has been happening closer than that. July 2018, -7.343, longitude 157.201 ©Alessio Bariviera



Aerial photo of logging activities in Isabel Province. The code of logging practice forbids any logging within 100 m of the high-tide mark of the sea. The light green strip in this photo is a logging road that has grown over with vines and therefore shows that logging has been taking place here that breached the code of practice. July 2018, latitude -7.616, longitude 158.392 ©Alessio Bariviera

The UN Environment Programme reports that one of the ‘key areas’ of illegality is companies harvesting species that are protected by law,<sup>79</sup> which is not only a problem in terms of illegality but also in terms of the conservation of rare or endangered species.

The law prohibits the export of unprocessed logs of vitex (*Vitex cofassus*), kwila (*Intsia bijuga*), white beech (*Gmelina moluccana*) and rosewood (*Pterocarpus indicus*).<sup>80</sup> Yet despite this, our investigation showed that two Chinese companies imported more than 400 tonnes of kwila logs from the Solomon Islands in 2017.<sup>81</sup>



#### 4. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT COMPANIES DO NOT CONDUCT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

According to a group of lawyers who have worked in the Solomon Islands, 'much' logging in the country is illegal and one of the principal reasons is that the companies have not conducted environmental impact assessments.<sup>82</sup>

In 2010, the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association, which obtained the injunction against Success Company and its contractor Xiang Lin

(SI) from logging above an altitude of 400 m, accused the companies of logging without having carried out any environmental impact assessment. They successfully obtained a court injunction to halt logging until the courts could decide on whether the logging was legal or not.<sup>83 84 85 86</sup>



Was an environmental impact assessment carried out before this land was logged? ©Alessio Bariviera

#### 5. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT LOGGING COMPANIES DO NOT COMPLY WITH LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AROUND MAPS

When applying for a felling license, a logging company must include a detailed map of where they intend to log. According to the Solomon Islands' chapter of Transparency International, 'many' maps do not comply with the requirements and often are 'only A4 photocopies of the 1:50,000 maps with a marker drawn on them', despite the fact that large-scale maps showing ridges, valleys and streams are available from the Ministry of Lands.<sup>87</sup>

They further allege that the logging companies' maps sometimes a) include areas of forest that do not belong to the landowners involved in negotiating the rights to log their land, b) do not cover the true boundaries of the land they intend to log, and as a result, such maps have been the source of many disputes between communities and logging companies.<sup>88</sup>

It is evident that logging, while happening on a wide scale in the Solomon Islands, is regularly carried out in a highly illegal manner, and done so by a number of operators rather than one specific suspect player.

This means that timber coming from the Solomon Islands is at a high risk of being illegal and poses a business risk, not only to countries bound by regulation like the EU Timber Regulation and the US Lacey Act, but also to countries like China, who import a large quantity of this potentially illegal timber and sell it on to other markets at a high risk to their businesses and the country's reputation as a trading partner.

## 3. LOGGING AND DEVELOPMENT

The timber trade in the Solomon Islands does little to benefit local people

Our research revealed examples of how the timber trade in the Solomon Islands does little to benefit local communities. Problems ranged widely – from logging companies failing to make good on promises, to destroying food and water sources that people rely on. There is little evidence that royalty payments benefit local people – and there is a high risk that logging companies do not pay the taxes they owe.



An oil slick near a logging camp, Choiseul province, July 2018. © Alessio Bariviera

### 1. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT PEOPLE IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS DO NOT BENEFIT FROM THE TRADE IN TIMBER

It is often argued that logging tropical forests is a good idea because it brings development to local communities. Essentially, that it is worth swapping trees for dollars; that logging brings development. This argument, however, does not stack up in the Solomon Islands.

According to a study in which hundreds of people in five provinces across the country were interviewed, logging companies' promises to build houses and clinics and to employ local people are rarely written into the agreements landowners make with the logging companies, and landowners often experience problems with disruption to water courses, conflict within the tribe and sexual exploitation.<sup>89</sup> When promises from logging companies to build housing and clinics *are* written into the agreements, they are rarely fulfilled.<sup>90</sup>

Reuters reports that rural communities have seen little benefits from the logging, and instead have been adversely affected, with wild food sources destroyed and water sources polluted.<sup>91</sup>

**"The stream which provides us with a water supply is polluted with oil from dirty logging machinery and our pipe has been broken by falling trees, so now we have to paddle our canoes for miles to get clean water."**

**Vezinia Danny, from a village on the island of Kolombangara, quoted in an article by Reuters<sup>92</sup>**

The World Bank cites research which says that there is little evidence that logging royalties improve villages and that the money that does flow is usually divisive and un-transparent.<sup>93</sup> The report is just over a decade old, but its findings are likely to still be relevant now.



## 2. THERE IS A HIGH RISK THAT LOGGING COMPANIES DO NOT PAY THE TAXES THEY OWE

Landowners are supposed to receive royalties from logging companies. Typically, agreements between logging companies and landowners allocate 60% of the value of the timber to the loggers, 25% of the value to duties and 15% to landowners.<sup>94</sup> The UN Environment Programme states that this is often reported as a 60:40 split between logging companies and landowners, which is misleading as the duties are paid out of the landowners' share.

In addition, a 2009 report by the UN Environment Programme says that there are regular reports that logging companies under-declare their income to communities and thus underpay them, and that communities do not have enough information to be able to challenge them.<sup>95</sup> The Solomon Islands chapter of Transparency International agrees, quoting a 2005 report of the Auditor General as saying that royalties are sometimes not paid.<sup>96</sup>

There are widespread reports that logging companies underpay the taxes that they owe to the Solomon Islands government and therefore do not contribute as they ought to the development of the country in this way.

In terms of the log export taxes, there are widespread reports of underpayment,<sup>97 98 99 100</sup> particularly through substantially<sup>101</sup> under-declaring the value of log exports. Government officials are said to be frank about acknowledging the issue<sup>102</sup> but inspections of shipments are rare or non-existent, making it easy for any unscrupulous company to get away with underpaying their log export taxes.<sup>103</sup> In addition to allegations of tax evasion by logging companies, it is also reported that the official system for valuing logs undervalues them with respect to international prices.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the most recent Article IV report by the International Monetary Fund calls on the Solomon Islands government to align these prices with world market prices in order to increase government revenue.<sup>105</sup> The analysis that we carried out of official import/export figures from the Solomon Islands and from China (see figure 2) shows that there is an overall consistency between the volume of logs that the Solomon Islands says it exports and the volume that other countries say they import. It therefore would appear that the main way that export taxes are avoided is by under-declaring the value of logs rather than their volume.

In terms of corporate taxes, an unpublished 2015 report for the World Bank found that “all the 100 or so logging companies in Solomon Islands report loss-making operations for tax purposes”,<sup>106</sup> and therefore would not have to pay any corporate taxes at all. It is difficult to see how companies logging primary rainforest full of expensive hardwoods and sometimes under-paying export taxes manage to continually make a loss. Such losses are a red-flag indicator of transfer pricing: of a company selling timber at an artificially low price to a related company elsewhere in order to book any profits in a lower tax jurisdiction.

In 2005 the Solomon Islands' Auditor General published a special audit report into the financial affairs of the then Ministry of Forestry, Environment and Conservation. The report documented fraud and corruption throughout the forestry sector<sup>107</sup> and found that auditing was often impossible.<sup>108</sup> According to the FAO, “The account of one of the logging companies revealed [SI\$]884,189 [approximately US\$110,000] was owed to the Solomon Islands Government in 2003 and 2004, a further [SI\$]319,026 [approximately US\$40,000] was lost in unauthorised payments in 2001 and 2003, and [SI\$]334,736 [approximately US\$42,000] was unaccounted for in 2002.”<sup>109</sup>

Estimates of the size of the problem are dated but shocking nonetheless.<sup>110</sup> It is estimated that in the early 1990s the government lost revenues equivalent to an astonishing 35% of the country's GDP or 53% of government revenue. The majority of this (72%) was due to the under-reporting of log prices and the rest (28%) due to poorly designed contracts.<sup>111</sup>

In 2004 it was reported that the country lost out on SI\$30 million,<sup>112</sup> which amounted to 11% of the country's GDP,<sup>113</sup> because of export tax exemptions granted to logging companies.

The next section of this report outlines exactly how strong the connection is between China and the Solomon Islands' potentially illegal timber.

## 4. CHINA'S ROLE

### China imports the majority of logs exported by the Solomon Islands

The tiny Solomon Islands, only 28,400 square kilometres, is China's second-biggest source of tropical logs after Papua New Guinea. Because of this, the sustainability and legality of the wood coming from PNG and the Solomon Islands is more critical to China than anywhere else in the world. This poses a commercial risk to Chinese exporters as the majority of consumer countries, including the EU, US and Australia, have legislation in place that requires companies to do checks to ensure that the timber was legal in its country of harvest. At present, Chinese companies are unlikely to be able to assure their customers that this is the case. Indeed, the risks of illegal logging in the Solomon Islands are high enough that importers of uncertified timber in regulated jurisdictions are unlikely to be able to meet their legal requirements without extensive site visits.

This section looks in more detail at how:

1. China is the primary destination of logs exported from the Solomon Islands
2. The Solomon Islands is China's second biggest source of tropical logs after Papua New Guinea
3. The fate of Chinese businesses importing logs from the Solomon Islands is linked to regulating timber imports

### 1. CHINA IMPORTS THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF LOGS FROM THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

The overwhelming majority of logs exported from the Solomon Islands go to China. In 2016, 82% of logs went to China; in 2014, the figure was as high as 95%.<sup>115</sup>

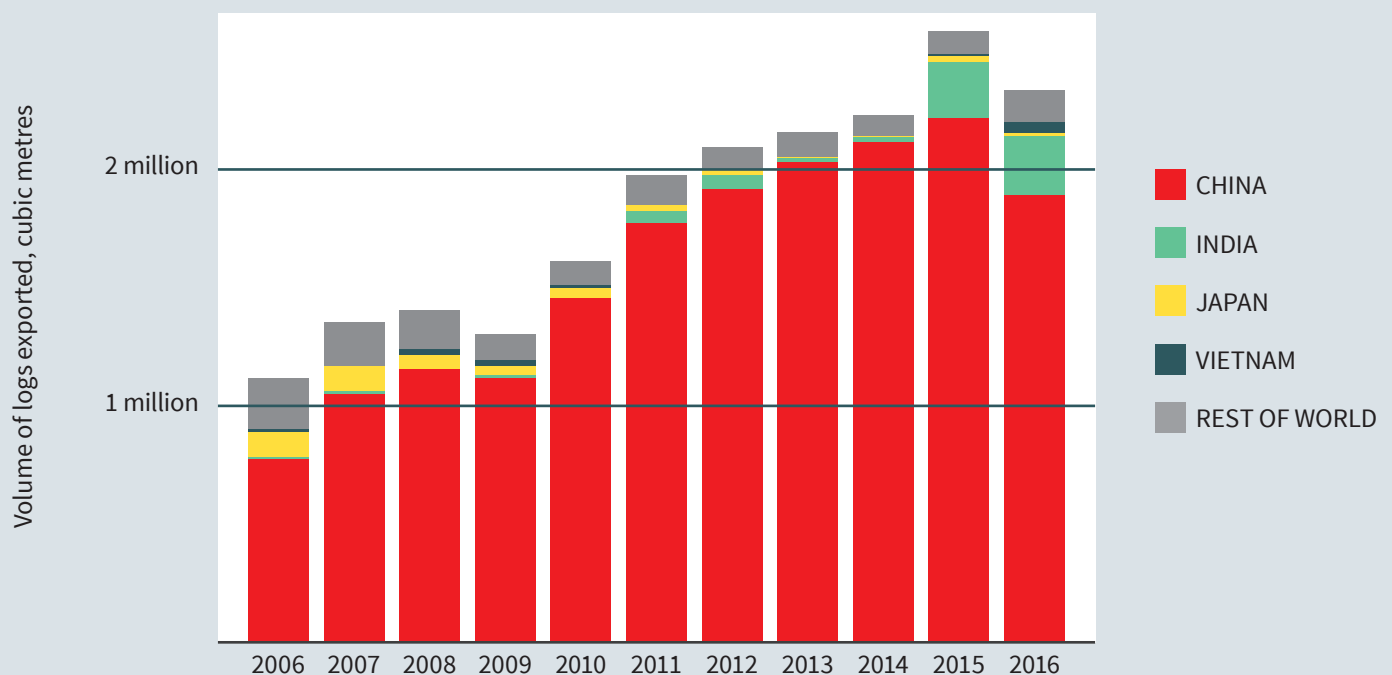


Figure 3: The primary destination of logs exported from the Solomon Islands, 2006-2016, according to statistics from importing countries<sup>114</sup>

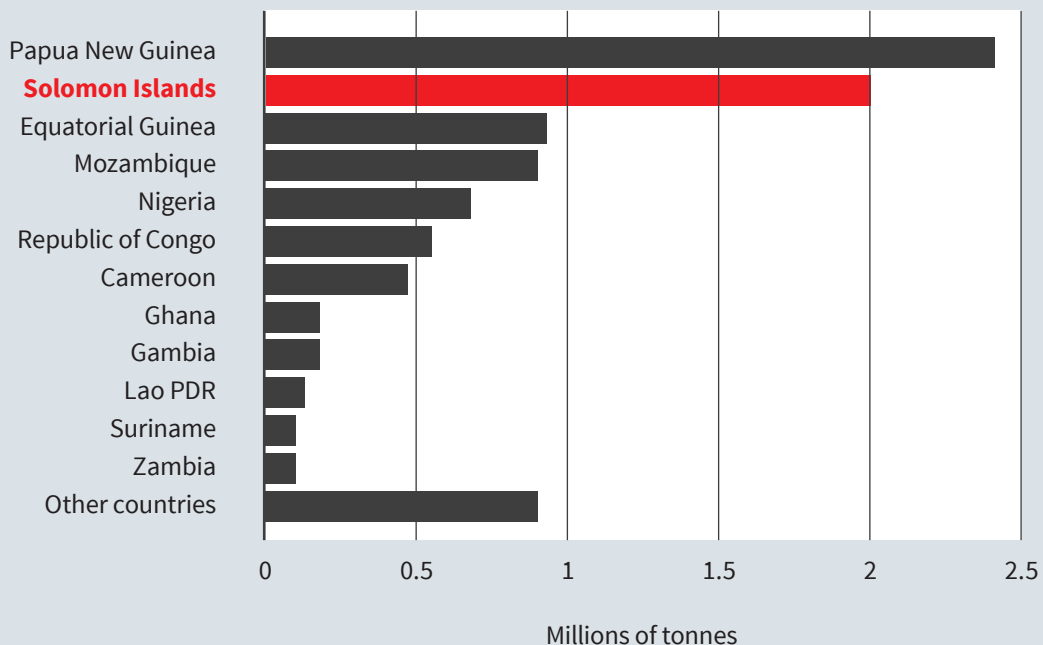
## 2. THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IS CHINA'S SECOND BIGGEST SOURCE OF TROPICAL LOGS AFTER PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The timber trade is not just important to the Solomon Islands, but also to China. Amazingly, the tiny Solomon Islands, which at 28,400 square kilometres is less than twice the size of Beijing,<sup>116</sup> is China's second-biggest source of tropical logs, after Papua New Guinea.



Destination China. Logs being loaded onto the Serenity 1 in south-east Choiseul, Solomon Islands, August 2018. Latitude -7.394, longitude 157.495  
On 22 September 2018, the Serenity 1 docked at the port near Shanghai, destined for Jingjiang ([www.marinetraffic.com](http://www.marinetraffic.com)) ©Alessio Bariviera

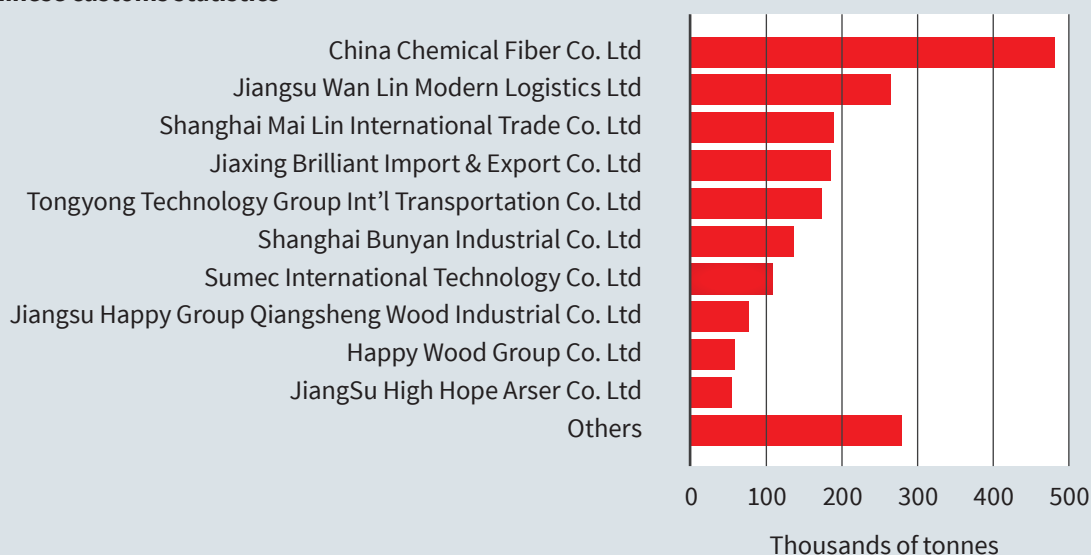
**Figure 4: Where China imported its tropical logs from in 2017 <sup>117</sup>**





### 3. THE FATE OF CHINESE BUSINESSES IMPORTING LOGS FROM THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IS LINKED TO REGULATING IMPORTS OF TIMBER

**Figure 5: The main importers of logs from the Solomon Islands into China in 2017, according to information from official Chinese customs statistics<sup>118</sup>**



The implications of this graph are profound for China and highlight the reputational risks of Chinese companies purchasing timber from the Solomon Islands.

Official Chinese customs statistics for 2017 show that, on average, 1 tonne of logs from the Solomon Islands was equivalent to 1.37 cubic metres. The weights in the graph above can therefore be converted into approximate volumes (see Appendix for details).<sup>119</sup>

Given that the volume of timber that can sustainably be harvested from the Solomon Islands is estimated to be 155,000 cubic metres a year,<sup>120</sup> this means that in 2017:<sup>121</sup>

- China Chemical Fibre Company imported four times as much timber as the Solomon Islands can sustainably produce.
- Jiangsu Wanlin Modern Logistics and its associated company Shanghai Mai Lin International Trade<sup>122</sup> imported four times as much timber as the Solomon Islands can sustainably produce.
- Jiaxing Brilliant Import and Export, Tongyong Technology Group International and Shanghai Bunyan Industrial Company each imported more timber than the Solomon Islands can sustainably produce.

We wrote to the companies named in the bullet points above to put these allegations to them; none of them replied.

Chinese companies together import more than twelve times the timber that the Solomon Islands can sustainably produce.<sup>123</sup>

The most recent estimate of the annual sustainable yield of timber in the Solomon Islands that we can find is from a report commissioned by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

**Most of China's major wood trading partners – including the US, Japan, the UK, South Korea, Canada, Australia and Germany – have laws in place that require companies to check that timber was harvested legally in its country of harvest. This makes purchasing timber from the Solomon Islands a commercial risk for Chinese companies.**

More and more companies are asking their Chinese suppliers to tell them where they source their timber from and what checks they have done to ensure it was harvested legally. It is difficult to see how any importer could satisfy themselves that uncertified timber from the Solomon Islands was likely to be legal unless they have conducted extensive on-site visits. These changes have been accelerated by cases such as that of the US timber flooring giant Lumber Liquidators which was fined US\$13 million for (among other things) falsely declaring that timber had come from Europe when it had actually come from the Russian Far East. Lumber Liquidators had imported the timber in question from companies in China.<sup>124</sup>

# 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has unpacked the issues that lie at the heart of the Solomon Islands' disappearing forests. The hugely unsustainable rate of logging, the high risks of illegality around how timber is sourced on the islands, the fact that the industry does little to benefit local people – all of these create a picture of islands far from unspoiled, untouched or unexploited.

Despite constant warnings from officials, academics and landowners, there continues to be issues with unsustainable harvesting and a lack of enforcement of forestry laws in the Solomon Islands.

If this situation is going to change, the Solomon Islands needs China to act. Nearly all of the Solomon Islands' timber is exported to China, with this small group of islands the country's second biggest source of tropical logs.

While China is taking serious steps to address environmental degradation and to reduce pollution and carbon emissions at home, it is overlooking an important aspect of its ecological footprint: the raw materials that it sources from abroad.

The innovative steps that China is taking to reduce its own carbon emissions will be undermined if it continues to buy so much tropical wood from the Solomon Islands. By not

questioning the illegal activity businesses are taking part in, China enormously increases the risks to its businesses and those they trade with.

This report and our previous analysis of Papua New Guinea show that 50% of China's tropical logs come from countries whose forest sectors are plagued with risks of illegality. If China continues to buy its wood with 'no questions asked' from the Solomon Islands it risks undermining efforts by its trading partners to improve governance, prevent environmental degradation, mitigate climate change and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Time is running out for China – to protect both the Solomon Islands it so vastly profits from, and its position as a leader and pioneer in global trade and environmental governance.



Zhangjiagang port is one of the largest timber ports in China, where most of Solomon Islands' logs enter China. © Google Map/Digital Globe 2017

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to help curtail the issues of illegality and unsustainability revealed in the report, we recommend the following:

### SOLOMON ISLANDS

➤ The Solomon Islands government should immediately place a moratorium on all existing logging operations and review the issuance of their permits and the operations themselves for legal violations. Permits found to have been issued or operated illegally should be cancelled.

Until such time as a moratorium is imposed:

➤ The Solomon Islands government should create a publicly accessible electronic system of documents related to the issuance and oversight of logging operations, including detailed maps of concession boundaries, the names of landowners consenting to the logging, details of revenue sharing agreements, details of the total logs that are allowed to be extracted as well as the number extracted each month. This will allow landowners to monitor how their own land is being used and challenge any unauthorised uses, as well as facilitate thorough due diligence by timber buyers.

➤ The Solomon Islands should re-join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), extending the coverage to forestry. The EITI is an initiative involving governments, civil society, extractive industry companies and investors. It aims to bring transparency to extractive revenue payments to governments by monitoring incoming and outgoing payments flows. The EITI's rules require member governments to ensure all extractive companies based in their jurisdiction publish their payments to governments, and that civil society is able to hold all players to account.

➤ The Solomon Islands should employ an independent organisation or expert company to verify the volumes, values and species of logs that are exported in order to check that the logging companies are paying the correct amount of taxes.

### CHINA

➤ The Chinese government should put in place mandatory measures requiring all timber importers to carry out due diligence to ensure they do not import timber produced in violation of source country laws. The measures should require importers to go beyond official documents as proof of legality and require importers to investigate and verify the conditions under which the timber was produced. The measures should also require companies to publish their due diligence policy and procedures.

➤ The Chinese government should expand its national Green Supply Chain policies to include requirements on the sourcing of timber and other raw materials abroad, by establishing mandatory requirements for these materials to be sourced legally.



# APPENDIX

The table below shows the weight of logs from the Solomon Islands imported by Chinese companies in 2017 according to data from China Customs.<sup>125</sup> We are not alleging that any of the companies in this table have broken the law. The point is that companies in China are allowed to import timber without checking that it was legal in its country of harvest. This should change.

NAME OF IMPORTING COMPANY ENGLISH	CHINESE	Also an importer of logs from PNG?	Total import from SI (kg)	Total import from SI (m <sup>3</sup> )*
China Chemical Fiber Co. Ltd.	中国化纤有限公司	Yes	481,890,754	660,190
Jiangsu Wan Lin Int'l Wood Industry Co. Ltd	江苏万林现代物流股份有限公司	Yes	264,901,369	362,915
Shanghai Mai Lin International Trade Co. Ltd	上海迈林国际贸易有限公司	Yes	188,499,848	258,245
Jiaxing Brilliant Import & Export Co. Ltd	嘉兴市百霖进出口有限公司		185,753,983	254,483
Tongyong Technology Group Int'l Transportation Co. Ltd	通用技术集团国际物流有限公司		172,976,242	236,977
Shanghai Bunyan Industrial Co. Ltd	上海保越实业有限公司		135,068,315	185,044
Sumec International Technology Co. Ltd	苏美达国际技术贸易有限公司		107,099,417	146,726
Jiangsu Happy Group Qiangsheng Wood Industrial Co. Ltd	江苏快乐集团强盛木业有限公司	Yes	76,917,576	105,377
Happy Wood Group Co. Ltd	快乐木业集团有限公司	Yes	57,539,316	78,829
JiangSu High Hope Arser Co. Ltd	江苏汇鸿亚森国际贸易有限公司		53,352,301	73,093
Guangdong Guangxin Trade Development Co. Ltd	广东广新贸易发展有限公司		46,080,864	63,131
Yangzhou Jianglin Wood Industrial Co. Ltd	扬州江林木业有限公司		38,826,089	53,192
Xiamen Xiangyu Suchuan Supply Chain Development Stock Co. Ltd.	厦门象屿速传供应链发展股份有限公司		35,353,980	48,435
Wenzhou Lignum Group Co. Ltd	温州木材集团有限公司	Yes	32,700,092	44,799
Zhoushan Dongchang Lumber Co. Ltd	舟山东昌木业有限公司		20,927,515	28,671
Shanghai Sheng Wosheng Forest Co. Ltd	上海胜握胜林业有限公司		20,194,768	27,667
(Not stated)	湖州格恩斯进出口有限公司		19,678,380	26,959
Nien Made (Wulian) Window Fashions Co. Ltd	亿丰(五莲)制帘有限公司		15,219,609	20,851
Suifenhe Guolin Wood Industry Park Investment Co. Ltd	绥芬河国林木业城投资有限公司		13,796,997	18,902
Fujian Youxi Baiying Wood Industry Co. Ltd	福建省尤溪百营木业有限公司		12,717,470	17,423
(Not stated)	浙江湖州联成木业有限公司		11,788,415	16,150
Zhejiang Huzhou Lian Cheng Wood Industry Co. Ltd	浙江湖州联成木业有限公司		6,417,856	8,792
Ningbo City Hong Guang Decoration Materials Co. Ltd	宁波市红光装饰材料有限公司	Yes	3,954,065	5,417
(Not stated)	湖州格恩斯进出口有限公司		1,033,386	1,416
Foshan V-Jetone import & Export Co. Ltd	佛山市华捷通进出口有限公司		544,100	745
(Not stated)	广州谷一供应链管理有限公司		96,200	132
Jiangmen Wide Margin Abundant Trade Co. Ltd	江门市广裕丰贸易有限公司		46,290	63
Yantai Hong Ao Import & Export Co. Ltd	烟台鸿奥进出口有限公司		42,800	59
(Not stated)	n/a		33,000	45
Shanghai Shenhong Import & Export Co. Ltd	上海申航进出口有限公司		21,150	29
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>2,003,472,147</b>	<b>2,744,757</b>

\* Assuming that one tonne is 1.37 cubic metres, which was true of mixed species exports of logs from the Solomon Islands in 2017 according to UN Comtrade.<sup>126</sup>

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Global Witness  
1 Mark Square  
London  
EC2A 4EG  
United Kingdom

[www.globalwitness.org](http://www.globalwitness.org)

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