

An Open Letter about Scientific Credibility and the Conservation of Tropical Forests

To whom it may concern:

As professional scientists employed by leading academic and research institutions, we are writing to alert the general public about some of the claims and practices being used by the World Growth Institute (WGI) and International Trade Strategies Global (ITS), and their affiliated leadership.

WGI and ITS operate in close association. ITS is owned by Alan Oxley, an Australian industrial lobbyist, former trade representative, and former Ambassador who also heads WGI. According to its website¹, ITS also has "close associations" with several politically conservative US think tanks, including the American Enterprise Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation.

In our personal view, WGI and ITS—which are frequently involved in promoting industrial logging and oil palm and wood pulp plantations internationally—have at times treaded a thin line between reality and a significant distortion of facts. Specifically, we assert that:

- ITS is closely allied with, and frequently funded by, multinational logging, wood-pulp, and oil palm corporations. The financial supporters of ITS include parent corporations producing paper and wood products under the aegis of ‘Asian Pulp & Paper’, among others.
- Alan Oxley and ITS have often lobbied in favor of Rimbunan Hijau², one of the world’s largest industrial logging corporations. Rimbunan Hijau has been repeatedly criticized for its environmental and human-rights impacts in Papua New Guinea^{3,4}.
- WGI frequently lobbies public opinion on the behalf of Sinar Mas holdings, a conglomerate of mostly Indonesian logging, wood-pulp, and oil palm companies that includes Golden Agri Resources, a Singapore-based firm. One of these companies, known as ‘SMART’, could face expulsion by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, an industry-led trade group, for “serious non-compliance with the RSPO Code of Conduct” with respect to its environmental and social sustainability guidelines⁵.
- In an interview with Malaysia’s *The Star* newspaper, in which he strongly advocated further oil palm expansion in that country, Mr Oxley refused to answer a direct question as to whether he or WGI was supported by the Malaysian palm oil industry. He dismissed this question as being “immaterial”⁶. We believe that WGI’s financial supporters include many of the same industrial sectors for which WGI regularly advocates.
- While routinely accusing several environmental organizations and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of bias and scientific misrepresentation, WGI and ITS have, in our opinion, advanced a range of biased or distorted arguments themselves. For example, consider an ostensibly “independent”

audit⁷ from ITS that sought to exonerate Asian Pulp & Paper from claims of illegal and damaging logging practices in Sumatra, Indonesia. This audit appears to be far from objective in scope, especially given the clear financial links between these two entities, which brings into question its claims to be “independent”. Among other claims, the ITS audit broadly understates the scope and gravity of forest loss and degradation in Indonesia, despite that nation having among the world’s highest absolute rates of deforestation⁸ and being ranked 7th worst out of 200 nations in terms of net environmental damage, according to a recent analysis⁹. It also suggests that the palm oil and pulp and paper industries are not important drivers of deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions in Indonesia. Yet recent research has demonstrated that much of the oil palm expansion in Indonesia between 1990 and 2005 came at the expense of native forests¹⁰ (many plantation owners favor clearing native forests over already-degraded lands as they use revenues from logging to offset the costs of plantation establishment¹¹). Moreover, the rapid expansion of pulp plantations is a serious driver of native-forest loss in both Sumatra and Kalimantan, Indonesia.¹²

- A recent technical report by ITS concluded that “There is no evidence of substantial deforestation” in Papua New Guinea¹³, a conclusion strongly at variance with quantitative, remote-sensing studies of forest conversion published in the refereed scientific literature^{14,15}.
- Reports from WGI and ITS routinely claim that newly established oil palm plantations sequester carbon more rapidly than do old-growth rainforests. This claim, while technically correct, is a distraction from the reality that mature oil palm plantations store much less carbon than do old-growth rainforests (plantations store just 40-80 tons of biomass aboveground, half of which is carbon, compared to 200-400 tons of aboveground biomass in old-growth rainforests¹⁶). WGI and ITS reports have also in our view dismissed or downplayed other important environmental concerns, including the serious impact of tropical peat-land destruction on greenhouse gas emissions¹⁷ and the impact of forest disruption on threatened species such as orangutans and Sumatran tigers^{18,19}. Furthermore, WGI and ITS, we believe, have failed adequately to recognize that many forests of high conservation value are being destroyed and fragmented by plantation development²⁰—a process that is mostly driven by corporations, not small holders.
- WGI, ITS, and Alan Oxley frequently invoke “poverty alleviation” as a key justification for their advocacy of oil palm expansion and forest exploitation in developing nations, and it is true that these sectors do offer significant local employment. Yet forest loss and degradation also have important societal costs. There are many examples in which local or indigenous communities in the tropics have suffered from large-scale forest loss and disruption, have had their traditional land rights compromised, or have gained minimal economic benefits from the exploitation of their land and timber resources^{4,21}. Such costs are frequently ignored in the arguments by WGI, ITS, and Alan Oxley.
- One of the most serious misconceptions being promulgated by WGI and ITS in our view is that “two-thirds of forest clearance is driven by low-income people in poor countries”²². In fact, the importance of industrial drivers of deforestation—which includes large-scale palm oil and wood-pulp plantations, industrial logging, large-scale cattle ranching, large-scale farming of soy, sugarcane, and other crops, and oil

and gas exploration and development—has risen dramatically in the past 1-2 decades^{23,24}. These industrial drivers are largely responsible for the explosive expansion of roads in tropical frontier regions, which facilitates massive forest loss and degradation²⁵. Such industries and their lobbyists also create great pressures on the governments of developing nations to allow access to their lands and natural resources, both via legal and illegal means^{26,27}. Hence, a crucial and overarching cause of tropical forest loss and degradation today is rapidly increasing industrialization and globalization. We believe WGI either fails to comprehend, or is failing accurately to convey, the real and growing magnitude of industrial drivers as a threat to tropical forests.

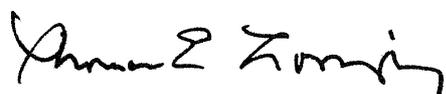
In summary, our goal is not to defend any environmental organization or to suggest that environmentally and socially equitable development is not an important objective for developing and transitional nations. Nor we dispute that oil palm plantations, when established on previously deforested or abandoned lands such that they do not contribute either directly or indirectly to deforestation, can have important economic benefits and largely acceptable environmental costs.

However, we do assert that a number of the key arguments of WGI, ITS, and Alan Oxley represent significant distortions, misrepresentations, or misinterpretations of fact. In other cases, the arguments they have presented amount to a “muddying of the waters,” which we argue is designed to defend the credibility of the corporations we believe are directly or indirectly supporting them financially. As such, WGI and ITS should be treated as lobbying or advocacy groups, not as independent think-tanks, and their arguments weighted accordingly.

Sincerely,



William F. Laurance, Ph.D.
Distinguished Research Professor & Australian Laureate
Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation
James Cook University, Cairns, Queensland, Australia



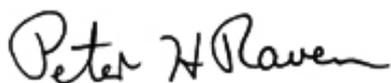
Thomas E. Lovejoy, Ph.D.
Biodiversity Chair, The Heinz Center, Washington, D.C., USA
University Professor, George Mason University, Virginia, USA



Sir Ghilleen Prance, FRS, VMH
Professor and Director Emeritus of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK



Paul R. Ehrlich, Ph.D.
 Bing Professor of Population Studies
 President of the Center for Conservation Biology
 Stanford University, California, USA



Peter H. Raven, Ph.D.
 President Emeritus
 Missouri Botanical Garden
 St. Louis, Missouri, USA



Susan M. Cheyne, Ph.D.
 Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, University of Oxford, UK
 Orang-utan Tropical Peatland Project, Director of Gibbon and Felid Research



Professor Corey J. A. Bradshaw, Ph.D.
 The Environment Institute and School of Earth & Environmental Sciences
 University of Adelaide; and South Australian Research & Development Institute
 Adelaide, Australia



Omar R. Masera, Ph.D.
 Professor and Director, Bioenergy Lab, National University of Mexico (UNAM)
 President, Mexican Network on Bioenergy, Morelia, Mexico
 Nobel Laureate on behalf of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change



Gabriella Fredriksson, Ph.D.
 Research Fellow, Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Studies
 Knighted in the Order of the Golden Ark
 University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Professor Barry W. Brook, Ph.D.
 Sir Hubert Wilkins Chair of Climate Change, and Director of Climate Science
 The Environment Institute and School of Earth & Environmental Sciences
 University of Adelaide, Australia



Lian Pin Koh, Ph.D.
 Senior Research Fellow
 ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology)
 Zurich, Switzerland

¹ <http://www.itsglobal.net/ourpeople.asp>

² http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Alan_Oxley

³ W.F. Laurance *et al.* (2010) Better governance to save rainforests. *Nature* **467**:789.

⁴ W.F.Laurance *et al.* (2010) Predatory corporations, failing governance and the fate of forests in Papua New Guinea. *Conservation Letters* (in press).

⁵ <http://www.rspo.org/?q=page/1518>

⁶ <http://biz.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/8/14/business/6853110&sec=business>

⁷ <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20100926005066/en>

⁸ “Scientists laud forest conservation deal for Indonesia,” Press release, Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation, Bali, Indonesia, 23 July 2010 (http://news.mongabay.com/2010/0723-atbc_resolution.html).

⁹ C.J.A. Bradshaw *et al.* (2010) Evaluating the relative environmental impacts of countries. *PLOS One* **5**:e10440. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0010440.

¹⁰ L.P. Koh & D. Wilcove (2008) Is oil palm agriculture really destroying tropical biodiversity? *Conservation Letters* **1**:60-64.

-
- ¹¹ E.B. Fitzherbert *et al.* (2008) How will oil palm expansion affect biodiversity? *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* **23**:538-545.
- ¹² C. Barr & C. Cossalter (2004) *Pulp and Plantation Development in Indonesia*. Centre for International Forestry Research, Bogor, Indonesia.
- ¹³ http://fiapng.com/PDF_files/PNG%20Land%20Use%20Report%20Final4%20Nov%202009.pdf
- ¹⁴ P.L. Shearman *et al.* (2009) Forest conversion and degradation in Papua New Guinea 1972-2002. *Biotropica* **41**, 379-390.
- ¹⁵ P.L. Shearman & J. Bryan (2010) A bioregional analysis of the distribution of rainforest cover, deforestation and degradation in Papua New Guinea. *Austral Ecology*, doi:10.1111/j.1442-9993.2010.02111.x.
- ¹⁶ H.K. Gibbs *et al.* (2008) Carbon payback times for crop-based biofuel expansion in the tropics: the effects of changing yield and technology. *Environmental Research Letters* **3**:34001. doi:10.1088/1748-9326/3/3/034001.
- ¹⁷ L.P. Koh *et al.* (2009) Conversion of Indonesia's peatlands. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* **7**:238.
- ¹⁸ M.F. Kinnaird *et al.* (2003) Deforestation trends in a tropical landscape and implications for endangered large mammals. *Conservation Biology* **17**:245-257.
- ¹⁹ M. Linkie *et al.* (2003) Habitat destruction and poaching threaten the Sumatran tiger in Kerinci Seblat National Park, Sumatra. *Oryx* **37**:41-48.
- ²⁰ B. Yaap *et al.* (2010) Mitigating the biodiversity impacts of oil palm development. *CAB Reviews* **5**:1-11. doi: 10.1079/PAVSNNR20105019.
- ²¹ M. Colchester (2010) *Palm Oil and Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia: Land Acquisition, Human Rights Violations and Indigenous Peoples on the Palm Oil Frontier*. Forest Peoples Programme, Moreton-in-Marsh, UK.
- ²² http://www.worldgrowth.org/assets/files/WG_Palm_Oil_CoIDam_Report_12_09.pdf.
- ²³ R.A. Butler & W.F. Laurance (2008) New strategies for conserving tropical forests. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* **23**:469-472.
- ²⁴ T.K. Rudel *et al.* (2009) Changing drivers of tropical deforestation create new challenges and opportunities for conservation. *Conservation Biology* **23**:1396-1405.
- ²⁵ W.F. Laurance *et al.* (2009) Impacts of roads and linear clearings on tropical forests. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* **24**:659-669.
- ²⁶ W.F. Laurance (2004) The perils of payoff: Corruption as a threat to global biodiversity. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **19**:399-401.
- ²⁷ J. Riaño & R. Hodess (2008) *Bribe Payers Index 2008*. Transparency International, Berlin, Germany.