

A culture-shocked Seamus returns from Solomons



Manager of Plantations Group Business Unit Seamus Mulholland.

Photo by Penny Walsh

SEAMUS Mulholland has returned to CALM after almost two years on secondment to the Ministry of Forests, Environment and Conservation in the Solomon Islands.

Seamus is now Manager of the Plantations Group Business Unit within the Forest Resources Division.

While in the Solomons, he worked for a company contracted by the Australian Government's international development agency (AusAID).

Seamus was the Commercial Unit Manager of the Solomon Islands Timber Control Unit Project.

His brief—to develop the commercial and marketing skills of key people in the local forestry division in order to improve the economic benefits from logging.

One important aspect of this was to exert some control on the transfer pricing of log exports from the country.

"Log exports represent more than 50 per cent of the Solomon Islands' export," Seamus said.

"They underpin the economy, so the current unsustainable management of the industry has serious implications for the islands both financially and socially."

The first hurdle Seamus

and his wife Anthea had to get over, however, was culture shock.

"Although not far away in global terms, the Solomons are a world away in facility and infrastructure terms," he said.

Few luxuries

"For a start, there were none of the usual luxuries like TV, safe drinking water and reliable power.

"We struggled to learn pidgin English so we could communicate with the locals, and we often became lost because the streets don't have names.

"The Solomons' climate also took some getting used to.

"The temperature rarely dips below 25 degrees, and there is a lot of rain—anything from two to five metres per year depending on where you live.

"But there was a great feeling of safety about the place, especially in the villages, and the people were easy going and friendly.

"About 90 per cent still live a subsistence lifestyle."

Seamus found that the locals were also very affectionate, and it was not uncommon to see men walking down the street holding hands or arm in arm.

"It's pretty strange the first time someone shakes

your hand and then doesn't let go of it," he said.

"Things are changing, however, because of the large amounts of foreign logging money coming in."

Seamus said there was a great deal of social dislocation, and the young people were no longer satisfied with what they saw as a primitive existence.

"Disputes over land ownership are rife.

"In the past, 'tribal' ownership required few boundaries and it was not uncommon for more than one group to have 'ownership' of the same land.

"Now, the profit motive has entered the equation, and the villagers realise that owning land with timber on it is valuable to them."

He said the islands needed better mechanisms to define exactly who owned what, and some systems to help work through issues as they arose.

"The current situation is confused and frustratingly slow.

"You quickly realise that you need to adjust your pace and work expectation to that of the islands.

"If you can achieve even the obvious, you've had a big win.

"That is not a criticism of the people, it is just a fact of life in the Solomons."

While he was living among the people of the Solomons, Seamus was dealing with the representatives of various foreign logging companies and international log buyers.

"I certainly developed my cross-cultural abilities; Going in to bat for the Solomon Islands in the cut-throat world of international log marketing was challenging at times," he said.

Unfortunately, his efforts were brought to an abrupt halt when the Australian Government decided to pull out of the islands due to a lack of commitment from the Solomon Islands government to sustainable development.

"It was disappointing, but completely understandable," Seamus said.

"Some of the people in the industry are genuine about making Solomon Islands forestry sustainable, but a lot of others are in it for the quick buck."

No regrets

After almost two years, and two bouts of malaria, Seamus says he wouldn't trade his time in the islands for anything.

"It really is a beautiful place, the ocean is clear and flat, the diving is fantastic and the people are happy and friendly."

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