Environmental Case Study
Rio Condor Forestry Project

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On distant Tierra del Fuego, Washington-based Trillium Corporation has developed a sustainable forestry initiative, encompassing approximately 272,000 hectares, known as the Rio Condor Project.

Tierra del Fuego is the near-legendary "Land of Fire" that captivated Darwin on the journey of the Beagle. The island sits at the southernmost reach of the South American continent and is nearly equally divided between Chile and Argentina. The Rio Condor property is predominantly forested, with a strong representation of primary, mature Nothofagus forests. The lands also include vast wetlands, remote alpine habitats, and extensive shorelines along the Straits of Magellan. The climate is similar to that found in Southeast Alaska, though the region is renowned for its distinctive winds.

One leading ecologist, representative of Rio Condor supporters, described the project as "a collaborative effort that all of humanity will come to appreciate." On the other hand, opponents claim the project will destroy the native forests of the region and imperil biodiversity on the island. This broad range of opinion is typical of major "sustainable development" projects today.

The Rio Condor Project was started in 1993. When Trillium acquired the lands, permits already were in place for a traditional industrial forestry development. The company voluntarily abandoned the permits and, in collaboration with a group of Chilean scientists and Chilean government agencies, re-planned the project to integrate the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem processes with commercial forest production.

As a first step, Trillium adopted a set of "Stewardship Principles" to govern its development on the project. The principles were published and provided by the company to major environmental organizations. These principles set standards for the project, exceeding Forest Stewardship Council criteria and positioning Rio Condor as a proving ground for sustainable forestry.

Applying those principles, the company

- initiated a global EIS process for the project, even though none was required under Chilean law at the time;
- established an independent commission of Chilean scientists to design and execute the EIS studies;
- engaged an Independent Land Steward to participate in all company discussions and decision making—who enjoys unlimited access to company records and was permitted to report on the project to the public whenever and however the steward deemed appropriate (The current land steward is a world-renowned forest ecologist on the faculty of a major university.);
- voluntarily set aside, in permanent reserve, approximately 63,000 hectares in five parcels selected by the scientists, to provide fail-safe protection of all ecosystem elements—notwithstanding all the other protections implemented in the "active-matrix" portions of the project; and
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- committed to a selective harvest regime in perpetuity, with no clear-cutting. Notwithstanding these unusual measures, the Rio Condor Project provoked criticism from both the Chilean timber industry (which opposed the prospect of new "best practices standards") and interest groups opposed to any harvesting of native forests. The environmental approval of the project rendered by the regional environmental agency of the Chilean government (COREMA) was appealed to the federal environmental agency (CONAMA) where it was unanimously affirmed. The federal agency approval was appealed all the way through the Chilean court system to the Chilean Supreme Court. The Chilean Supreme Court twice affirmed the permit approvals, finding no merit in any of the legal challenges lodged by the project’s opponents.

While preservationists brought legal challenges to attempt to stop the project, another set of voices concerned about the environment expressed a very different view. For example, Steward T.A. Pickett of the Institute for Ecosystems Studies wrote:

The Rio Condor Project represents modern ecological application and sustainable development at its best. It addresses the structure and response of the whole range of ecosystem components and does so in a dynamic and spatially sensitive way. Ecological, social and economic values are all kept in focus, while recognizing that all other values emerge from the ecological processes. The local and national communities are involved in the planning and in the benefit stream. This initiative, involving business and Chilean scientists, deserves wide attention and emulation.

After nearly six years of legal challenges and delays, the project began operations in 1999, with initial harvests at only a fraction of the permitted levels. The extensive monitoring and independent auditing (adaptive management systems agreed to by the company) yielded positive results the first year.

Most recently, under the IJI provisions of the Kyoto Protocol, Trillium obtained from the Chilean and U.S. governments approval of the Rio Condor Carbon Project. The company hopes to limit future harvests relative to the legally permitted harvest levels and, in lieu of that timber production, sell carbon offset credits into emerging emission reduction credit markets. If those markets are formalized and effective, the sale of carbon offsets will give the Rio Condor Project even more flexibility in managing its lands to balance all three legs of the "sustainability stool"--that is, environment, economics, and social justice.

Proving grounds for sustainable forestry, like the Rio Condor Project, are vital to the world just now--as it strives to demonstrate positive results in actual sustainable development projects. Sustainability strategies need to be applied in field conditions, results monitored, and management practices adapted to show how economic feasibility and environmental protection can be achieved in the private sector.

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