

DAVID ROBIE

Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Papua New Guinea and an author of books on the news media.

Gaining the edge in the timber furore

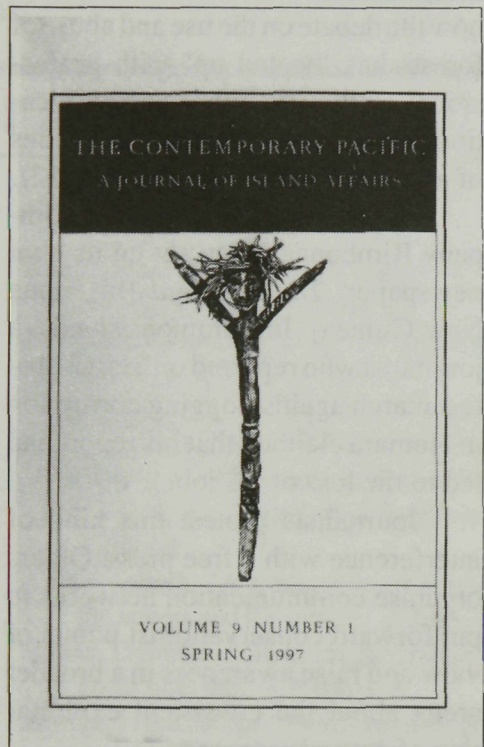
The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Pacific Island Affairs, Vol 9 No 1. Special Issue: 'Logging the South-western Pacific: Perspectives from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.' Edited by Kathleen Barlow and Steven Winduo. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. 302 pp. ISSN 1043-898X. Unpriced.

THE TIMBER resource development sector in Melanesia is vital in the political and socio-economic dynamics of the nations of the south-western Pacific. Yet journalists are not always as well-equipped to report the complexities of the issues with meaningful contexts as they should be.

Too often reporters become captive either to the logging company developers, or the non-government organisations campaigning for conservation.

Whoever mounts the best public relations campaign for the moment gets the ear of the press. And too often it is the forestry industry, with its better PR resources, that has the edge.

Few Pacific journalists ask the hard questions, or dig deeper. Journalism by press release and rhetoric is the general rule.



There are a handful of exceptions: Dominic Kakas and Harlyne Joku of *The Independent*, and Neville Togarewa of the *Post-Courier* are notable in Papua New Guinea.

This special edition of *The Contemporary Pacific* on logging in the region is a comprehensive and useful primer on the development and conservation issues at stake — especially for journalists who need to be better informed on the background.

Editors Kathleen Barlow, of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, and Steven Winduo, of the University of Papua New Guinea (currently on postgraduate studies at the University of Minnesota), provide a wide-ranging and informative introduction. They point to

DAVID ROBIE

how the debate on the use and abuse of forests has 'heated up' with professional media and other communication networks discussing the activities of all sides in the controversy (p 12).

'For example, the logging company Rimbunan Hijau set up its own newspaper, *The National* [in Papua New Guinea]. In Solomon Islands, a journalist who reported on a large protest march against logging corruption in Honiara claimed that his report had led to the loss of his job.

'Journalists protest this kind of interference with a free press. Others organise communication networks to put forward conservationist points of view and raise awareness in a broader arena about the consistent exploitation of natural resources.'

As the editors emphasise, local people are sandwiched between various efforts to persuade them how best to develop local resources.

'For some, logging appears to be their best chance to participate in the capitalist system and to gain access to its benefits. For others, it is a massive threat to deeply held values and to local adaptive strategies.

'For many it involves difficult choices about how to have the best of both worlds.'

Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu each have followed different paths over logging. In Vanuatu, where resource owners have been quite vocal in resisting exploitative logging, the political leadership has supported a 'culturally conserva-

tive and conservationist approach and has succeeded in reigning in logging operations' (p 11).

Solomon Islands under former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni supported full-scale development based on logging with growing resistance and escalating levels of violence.

While Papua New Guinea has generally improved its policy and legislation governing the logging industry, former Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan did not take a strong stand on regulating the industry. Current Prime Minister Bill Skate is under mounting pressure from the timber industry.

But in spite of some policy improvements, there has been a 'de facto shift in power from public servants to politicians in which the state acts coercively against its citizens in support of logging companies'.

Barlow and Winduo have gathered a diverse range of contributors for this volume. Ian Frazer, an anthropologist from the University of Otago, traces the rapid rise of logging in the Solomon Islands. Simon Saulei, of the University of PNG, examines the causes and consequences of the rapid increase in logging. Ralph Regenvanu, Stephen Wyatt and Luca Tacconi discuss both the development of logging and resistance to it in Vanuatu.

In a 'dialogue' section, Brian Brunton gives one non-government organisation perspective on logging while John Roughan, founder of Solomon Islands Development Trust, gives another.