

Illegal and Unsustainable Trade in Ramin

A Briefing Document for the 54th Meeting of the CITES Standing Committee, October 2006

Background

Ramin (*Gonystylus spp.*) is a tropical hardwood native to the fragile peat swamp forests of Indonesia and Malaysia. These forests provide critical habitat for a host of endangered species, including the orangutan and Sumatran tiger. As the most valuable timber species in these countries, ramin has been logged out in most of its range. Remaining populations have in recent years been subject to rampant illegal logging and associated trade, including in National Parks. Consequently in 2001 Indonesia listed ramin on Appendix III of CITES, and banned all cutting and trade, with one exception for a forest concession in Sumatra which had been independently certified as sustainably harvested.

Between 2001 and 2004, repeated evidence emerged of large-scale laundering of illegal Indonesian ramin through Malaysia, the only other significant range state, and Singapore. Due to the continued threats to the species, in 2004 the Parties to CITES agreed unanimously to upgrade ramin to Appendix II. Despite the partial success of this listing in dampening demand for ramin and reducing illegal trade, the effectiveness of the trade controls is being undermined by continued smuggling and bad management of peat swamp forests in Malaysia.

This briefing document shows how illegal and unsustainable trade of ramin have continued since the Appendix II listing took effect. It outlines how one of the main range states - Malaysia - has failed to carry out proper non-detriment findings for ramin exports and has no effective controls in place on ramin harvesting. It details recent expert studies which have found that Malaysia's peat swamp forests are massively over-logged and concluded that ramin cutting should be banned and the species listed on Appendix I. The briefing also documents recent evidence uncovered by EIA/Telapak investigations which show that illegal Indonesian ramin continues to be laundered through Malaysia in significant quantities.

Unsustainable Trade

Malaysia has set an annual export quota for 2006 of 45,000 cubic metres of ramin – 23,000 from Peninsular Malaysia and 22,000 from Sarawak. At a major workshop on ramin held in Kuala Lumpur in May 2006, serious doubts over the basis for these figures emerged, with Malaysian officials admitting that the figure for Sarawak was simply based on the level of exports prior to the CITES listing. The figure for Peninsular Malaysia was also revealed to be fundamentally flawed, with regulations governing logging in the small amount of remaining peat swamp forest being routinely flouted. Contrary to its duty under CITES, the Malaysian government has not carried out a proper non-detriment finding to assess the sustainability of its ramin exports.

Ramin harvesting in the only area in Indonesia where it is permitted is strictly controlled, and the annual cutting and export quota is based on a detailed understanding of the distribution of the species in the relevant forest concession. Unfortunately the situation in Malaysia is very different. Though regulations exist which limit the maximum quantity of timber which can be removed from a forest concession in each cutting cycle, these do not specify limits for particular species. It is therefore quite possible for a concessionaire to remove almost every ramin tree in a section of forest while staying within the cutting limits.

In SC54 Doc 31.2, the CITES Secretariat highlights as “disturbing” the findings of a recent study on the status of ramin and peat swamp forests in Sarawak. The Dutch/Malaysian study found that only 1.5 per cent of the original peat swamp forests remain in Sarawak, and that there is an almost total lack of information on the status and distribution of ramin. The experts concluded that there was a strong case for ramin cutting and trade to be banned, with the species listed on Appendix I of CITES. They recommended that all logging in peat swamp forests in Sarawak should be halted for at least 45 years.

Illegal Trade & Laundering

Because most of Malaysia's peat swamp forests have already been logged out, Malaysia's ramin industry has come to rely heavily on ramin imported from neighbouring Indonesia – most of it illegally sourced. Indonesia has failed to eradicate illegal ramin cutting, with logs being taken from peat swamps in Riau and Jambi provinces, Sumatra, and from protected areas in Kalimantan such as the Sebangau National Park.

Widespread laundering of stolen Indonesian ramin through Malaysia is well documented, with the largest case being uncovered by EIA/Telapak in the port of Pasir Gudang, Johor, in 2003, where 4,500 cubic metres of illegal ramin from Sumatra was passing through the port every month, en route to China.

Recent investigations by EIA/Telapak reveal that while the scale of the smuggling has reduced, Malaysia continues to trade in illegal ramin from Indonesia. One trader in Peninsular Malaysia who exports sawn ramin to Europe and Hong Kong with CITES permits admitted to supplementing legal supplies from Malaysia with smuggled ramin from Indonesia. Investigations in the Indonesian province of Riau confirm the continuing smuggling of ramin across the Malacca Straits into ports in western Malaysia. One smuggler in Riau claimed to ship 300 cubic metres every month, with squared logs of ramin hidden deep in the forest until buyers are found.

Further evidence comes from China. A number of companies producing ramin products such as picture frames and wooden blinds told EIA/Telapak investigators that their supplies of sawn ramin originate in Indonesia, pass through Malaysia where CITES certificates are issued, and onto China. One company exporting ramin products to Europe said CITES certificates for the finished products could be obtained if the customer requested it, but most clients did not ask and the goods were shipped by being declared as generic products rather than ramin.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- In accordance with the expert recommendations referred to in SC 54 Doc 31.2, the Parties to CITES should urgently consider uplisting ramin to Appendix I while looking into the possibility of an exemption for stocks independently certified as sustainable managed. The Standing Committee should offer support to any Party or Parties wishing to submit such a proposal.
- Malaysia has failed to make proper non-detriment findings for ramin exports, while expert evidence indicates that current Malaysian levels of legal cutting and trade are detrimental to the long term survival of the species. There is also evidence of continued illegal laundering of Indonesian ramin. These combined failures represent a significant breach of Malaysia's commitment under the Convention. The CITES Standing Committee and Secretariat should therefore consider appropriate measures, including a recommendation to Parties to suspend trade in CITES ramin specimens with Malaysia.
- For the same reasons, individual Parties should urgently consider taking unilateral action to halt imports of Malaysian ramin, through the provisions under the Convention on stricter domestic measures.
- Recent evidence indicates continuing serious threats from illegal trade and unsustainable harvesting of ramin, and the Standing Committee should therefore continue to retain the species on the agenda of future meetings.