

# ROSEWOOD: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE SMOKE

Ya'axché has been closely following the rosewood issue for almost two years and has been a persistent voice against the uncontrolled, often illegal harvesting. During this time Ya'axché has provided the Forest Department with technical advice and suggested steps needed for Belize to move towards sustainable use of this species. On Friday 11 January, the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development made the bold move of burning confiscated illegally cut rosewood fitches. Ya'axché admires the determination of the Minister in dealing with the illegal trade of rosewood. This decisive action sends a clear message to the world and illegal loggers that Belize will not tolerate illegal logging of its precious forests and that no one will profit from this illegal trade.

How has Belize ended up in a situation where such drastic action was necessary? The Maya communities of Toledo have used rosewood for traditional purposes for many years but the levels of harvesting seen from 2010 onwards were way beyond anything that could be classified as 'traditional use.' Harvesting a few trees each year from the forests surrounding the villages to build houses is one thing; harvesting hundreds of trees each month for export to China is quite another. It is no secret that in the past Belize has permitted the export of raw rosewood lumber. However, from 1992 to 1996, export was prohibited under Statutory Instrument 87, presumably to encourage the adding of value in country, and to prevent Belize's stocks from being exhausted. The ban on export was lifted in 1996. Records from the Forest Department suggest a steady rise in exports over the years, peaking in early 2012. China's import data reflects this trend and very clearly shows where the vast majority of rosewood has ended up. Considerable value is added in China through production of veneers and high-end furniture. Chinese companies make a fat profit. Belize is left with a fraction of the money it could have made, roads badly damaged by the movement of logging trucks, and degraded forests.

It is a fact that between 2010 and 2012, thousands of fitches were hauled from the forests of Toledo. Some of this lumber was legally harvested, either under a short or long-term license, or under the petty permit system. It is a fact that the permit system was widely abused, and that a great deal of this lumber was taken illegally, without permission from anyone. It is a fact that regardless of allegations of inherent corruption, the Belize Forest Department simply did not have the resources to manage or monitor felling of trees and movement of lumber on such a vast scale. The market eventually became flooded. With so much rosewood lumber available, the value per board foot dropped, and in many cases, the amount paid to the logger was also reduced. Some of those loggers came from Belize's most poverty-stricken communities. Were they even aware that their activities were illegal?

Allowing the export of vast quantities of raw lumber is a major driver of unsustainable logging; unsustainable logging damages forest ecosystems; and damaged ecosystems are bad news for the human population. Tighter control of harvesting and export is the only way to deal with such issues. It would have been impossible for the Forest Department to even begin to regulate trade in rosewood at a time when logging and export was such a free-for-all. This is why the moratorium was issued. It provides the Forest Department with a window in which to "assess the situation on the ground." Those who had lumber stockpiled were permitted a short time in which to have it properly assessed and exported, with the appropriate royalties paid to the Government.

Legally permitted exports of rosewood lumber ceased altogether in August 2012. In her statement to the press on 11 January, Minister Alamilla made it very clear that the moratorium still stands; **no one** has been issued with a permit (of any kind) to harvest rosewood.

A moratorium can only do so much. Without the appropriate resources to enforce laws, legislation can become next-to-useless. Since logging season re-opened in mid-October this year, there have been several incidents of illegal logging. Some effort has been made to deal with the law-breakers. It is a fact that neither the Forest Department nor the Police have sufficient, committed, appropriately equipped staff on the ground to put up a strong fight against organised, well-financed illegal logging operations. This needs to change.

How many rosewood trees are left standing in the forests of Toledo? No one knows for certain, and until such time as the Forest Department completes an inventory, the question will remain unanswered. A few facts are very clear; in Belize, rosewood is confined to a small area; if logging and export recommences and reaches the same level as seen over the past two years, commercial stocks are unlikely to last beyond 20 years. This would be the final nail in the rosewood coffin. The remaining stumps, seedlings and saplings are not likely to be commercially useful for perhaps 20 – 40 years. In other words, the short-sighted, short-term thinking of the few could ruin the potential long-term financial gain of many.

The moratorium was an essential and long-overdue step on the long road towards sustainable management of rosewood. Ya'axché will continue to advocate for the moratorium to remain in place until such time as the Toledo forest inventory is satisfactorily completed using an appropriate methodology, data has been analysed by the Forest Department, and the results are made public. Ya'axché will continue to advocate for the entire process to be transparent, and for the data to also be analysed by an independent forestry expert.

Belize is a nation founded on the exploitation of its timber resources. The Forest Department was established in 1935 to oversee a more organized approach to logging. Several decades later, scientific data suggests that in order to preserve the health of forest ecosystems (and in turn the health of the human population) forestry must be not just *organized* but also *sustainable*. If we continue to abuse our forests, they will disappear. This can be a turning point for forestry in Belize. We finally have a Minister who genuinely cares about the environment and can steer the Forest Department in the right direction.

The future of rosewood in Belize will depend on many things. Above all else it will depend on the continuing political will to protect the species and ensure that future generations of Belizeans can also benefit from the use of this increasingly valuable timber.

