



Rare tree species

# Endangered

## by Logging and Mining in Solomons

Photographs and story by Milton Keremama

### Brief description of *Xanthostemon* species

Locals call it “rie” in Choiseul or “tubi” in Isabel. Its botanical name is *Xanthostemon* sp (pronounced zanthos-temon) from the Myrtaceae family of the plant kingdom. This hardwood tree can reach a maximum height of around 35m. The trees derive its name from the showy golden stamen where in Greek xanthos means yellow and stemon means stamen. *Xanthostemon* sp is endemic to Choiseul and Isabel Island in Solomon Islands. An inventory report of this species undertaken by the Department of Forestry have not specified the species name, however, there are at least 45 known species found in parts of the Philippines,

New Caledonia and Australia.

Apart from its external features, locals have always referred to the extreme hardness, heaviness and the black coloration of this hardwood whenever a description of this tree is sought. The durable property of the wood enables locals to use it to make spear points, digging sticks, pestles and copra extractors, to name a few uses. Local assumption is that other industrial uses might be possible given proper feasibility studies into its abundance and properties.

According to the Department of Forestry, *Xanthostemon* sp is found principally on soils derived from ultramafic rocks. It was also noted that the

occurrence of nickel deposits in parts of Choiseul and Isabel Islands could also be related to the distribution and occurrence of the *Xanthostemon* sp on these areas. *Xanthostemon* sp are also found to be restricted to areas of wet climate where they are subject to frequent inundation by rainfall.

### Government stance on *Xanthostemon* species

Data collection on distribution and population of *Xanthostemon* sp by the Government’s Forestry Department averaged the stocks on Choiseul and Isabel to be 101,844 trees and 19,200 trees



respectively. This survey was done because the national government had realized the potential of exploiting this rare species by way of conservation. If these trees are to be protected it would be the first of its kind in the Solomon Islands, the conservation would be specific to only one terrestrial tree species.

In addition, an in-situ gene conservation reserve would also be established, as experts recognize the trees hardwood properties. The tree may also be a potential source for timber and other products that could be marketed locally and internationally.

The *Xanthostemon* sp. stocks may for the time being enjoy the shields of the

Following page: Logging a forest of rare and endangered tree species on Choiseul Island. Top: Landowner in logged forest. Once the company leaves landowners and communities are left with degrade forests, polluted streams and are worse of than before the company came. Above: Logging pond and road in Goragosele Passage which enters *Xanthostemon* forests.



recently gazetted Forestry Regulation (2005) where under section 44(r) “prohibits the felling and removal of any protected tree...”

However, the immediate financial pressure on landowners and the lack of local awareness on the importance of *Xanthostemon* sp could threaten the survival of this important species, as customary lands on Choiseul and Isabel Island are being exploited for round logs and by mining prospecting.

**A local case of *Xanthostemon* species exploitation on Zeleboe Land, southeast Choiseul**

Zeleboe Land is situated on southeast Choiseul Island covering an area of about 3,588 hectares. According to an inventory survey conducted by the Forestry Department, Zeleboe land contains an average stock of 29,232 *Xanthostemon* sp occurring on 252 hectares of land. Hence, there is a stock concentration of 116 trees per hectare. It is the second highest tree concentration of *Xanthostemon* sp on Choiseul Island, thus, making Zeleboe Land an important niche for this rare and endemic tree species.

**Sacrificing the “protected” for development?**

Today this important niche is now under threat from logging and mining-prospecting activities that began in 2006. In just under a year, the logging activities on Zeleboe Land had already caused drastic and devastating changes on its natural landscape and cultural heritage sites. This so called “development” would not be able to progress further (as the developer says) without sacrificing undersized trees as well as non-exportable tree species. As such, by early 2007 a total of 470 *Xanthostemon* sp were felled to make way for the access road that extended into the mountains towards the northeastern boundary of Zeleboe Land.

*Xanthostemon* trees, supposedly a protected species fell mercilessly by the hands of loggers in a matter of days? Obviously, the forestry act or the Standard Logging Agreement (SLA) of Solomon Islands does not specify the prohibition to fell protected

species along proposed access roads. In such a case, common sense should prevail so that an alternative road is constructed to by pass habitats that hold rare or protected species. But sadly in most cases loggers take advantage of such short falls care less about the environment.

Coincidentally, an Asian nickel mining company has also undertaken prospecting activities on Zeleboe Land. This company acknowledged the presence and abundance of these protected species, *Xanthostemon* sp on Zeleboe Land and its neighboring areas. Thus, in a meeting with land owners the company had recommended that SBD\$90 would be compensated to landowners for a felled *Xanthostemon* stem. SBD\$90 is equivalent to about USD\$12. This low price tag only reflects the value this foreign company is placing upon the livelihood of local resources and the local populace. If a full scale mining operation should eventuate here as anticipated then the fate of these *Xanthostemon* species will be very bleak.

**Challenge**

If Solomon Islands would endeavor to preserve and conserve this rare and endemic tree species then appropriate actions must be implemented as quickly as possible. On the ground, the rate at which customary lands are opening up for logging and mining activities seems to outpace any decent approach to exploit the natural resources to a minimal environmental impact. *Xanthostemon* species must therefore be treated as a fragile commodity, or else Solomon Islands could lose one of its endemic and rare trees forever to the impacts of logging and mining activities.

**Source:**

Department of Forestry, Environment and Conservation (2004), *Xanthostemon* sp Unpublished Report. <http://www.anbg.gov.au/gnp/gnp-extras/xanthostemon-verticillatus.html>

Left Above: Forests of southeast Choiseul. Left: The thoughtless felling of *Xanthostemon* trees by logging companies swathing through the last remaining forests of southeast Choiseul Island.

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