

# Illegal Logging Ravages Albania's Forests

*By Elvis Nabolli*

Corruption and incompetence prevent official crackdown on illegal trade that is degrading the environment in the mountainous north.

Every day, dozens of heavy vehicles laden with freshly harvested timber drive down the slopes of Feza Mountain in northern Albania towards the northern city of Shkodra.

The mountain is home to a thick forest, administrated by the forestry service, but degraded by continuous illegal logging. Since the collapse of Albania's communist regime back in 1991, the mountain has been mostly stripped of its vegetation &ndash; the desolate scenery bearing witness to the impact that this illegal activity is having on Albania's forests.

Although the impact of this trade on the environment is devastating, Balkan Insight has discovered that illegal loggers often get away with it, either bribing the forest rangers to turn a blind eye or relying on police incompetence.

While local authorities admit illegal logging is a problem, they maintain that they are working hard to curb it and even boast of some successes.

Official statistics claim illegal logging has declined since its peak in 1997, when the country collapsed into virtual anarchy following the bankruptcy of series of pyramid-like investment schemes.

But Albanian official statistics are highly unreliable. A 2005 World Bank study estimated that unrecorded, illegal logging in Albania exceeded the legal harvest by a factor of ten. The same study said most of the timber logged illegally in Albania is sold in the internal market for firewood or as raw material for industry.

Forest areas cover 36 per cent of Albania but have been heavily degraded over the past two decades. Feza Mountain, in the commune of Shllak, is not an isolated case. Other remote mountain areas, like Cukal, Postribe and Boge, have been similarly affected.

A number of villagers in Shllak are involved in illegal logging and speak freely about it. They told Balkan Insight that they mostly work in winter, when heavy snow makes travel difficult for police and forest rangers and when they can cut oak and chestnut trees in peace.

"We drive up the mountain early in the morning with an empty lorry and cut wood all day," said Gjin Ndoci, who works for a local company that harvests timber without a proper permit. "Loading begins in the afternoon and then we drive back down," Ndoci added.

In the village of Gegaj, locals say they see at least 30 lorries and excavators every day, loaded with illegally harvested timber and passing through on the way to Shkodra. Along the road through the village empty trunks are thrown here and there.

Ndoci says loggers like him encounter few problems with rangers. "When the forest police stop us we just pay them a bribe of about 1,000 lek [8 euro] and they let us pass through undisturbed," he explains.

The police are dealt with just as easily. "When we show them a photocopy of a permit to harvest wood, although it's for another area, they let us go," Ndoci said.

"If we run into an insistent cop who wants to look at our paperwork more carefully, we negotiate and give him money also," he added.

Ndoci knows that his logging in the forest is illegal, but says that there is no other choice of employment for him and other villagers, which is why he is not afraid to give his name. He resents the fact that outside companies come to exploit the forest that he says belongs to the local villagers, but says their only way to make ends meet is to become accomplices in the forest's indiscriminate exploitation.

Shkodra's police chief, Vullnet Topalli, admits the forestry service is implicated in the illegal logging in the mountains and does not deny that police accept bribes.

"Bribes are often handed over at the roadblocks set up by the forest service," he told Balkan Insight. "But it is not my responsibility to probe the officers. This is a matter that should be handled by the Internal Affairs Service [of the Ministry of Interior]," Topalli added.

Local experts agree that this illegal trade continues right in front of the authorities. "Dozens of vehicles loaded with timber pass freely into Shkodra every day without anyone ever bothering to stop them and examine their documents," Gjovalin Gjekaj, a Shkodra forestry expert, said.

Most companies engaged in this illegal deforestation are local. Some are based in the nearby town of Lezha or as far away as Kosovo, however.

The prefect of Shkodra, Maxhid Cungu, acknowledges the existence of the problem but maintains that his administration is working to curb it. "The forestry service has deployed a task force in the Feza Mountain area since September in order to compile an expert report on the situation and identify trouble-makers," he said.

Meanwhile, the director of the forestry service for the Shkodra region, Myzafer Kraja, says the rate of illegal logging on Feza Mountain is not as high as local villagers allege. "Four companies have legal permits to harvest timber in the area," he explains.

The villagers question such claims. They note that loggers often use duplicate licenses taken from other loggers and which apply to different areas. They also say that those loggers that do have permits often harvest far more wood than their designated quota.

Ndoci claims that his boss does not possess a permit to harvest wood on Feza Mountain. "He uses the permit of another company, which is allowed to harvest firewood in another area," he said.

Of five logging permits in the Shkodra area seen by Balkan Insight, it was clear that three of the companies were harvesting timber in areas where they did not have permits to operate.

The director of the forestry service, Kraja, says they are doing everything in their power to stop this and save the forest. Damage done to the forests by illegal logging was being rectified. "For every cut log that is cut, 2.5 new trees are being planted," he said.

Meanwhile, in recent years the forestry service had uncovered 35 cases of illegal logging in the Shkodra region, of which 19 had been referred to the courts, he added.

In 16 of these cases, the value of the timber sequestered was less than 500 US dollars. The illegal loggers were fined, based on the law on forests, which says the maximum fine may not exceed the value of the damage caused to the woodland.

In the more important cases, in which loggers risked up to one year's imprisonment, no convictions involving actual prison sentences have yet been recorded.

Even official data from the National Institute of Statistics, INSTAT, suggest the authorities are not confiscating much of the illegally harvested timber that they come across. They point to a confiscation rate of about 30 per cent.

When you factor in that the rate of illegal logging may be ten times higher than INSTAT's projections, the confiscation rate of illegally harvested timber is, in fact, miniscule.

Those employed in illegal logging are unaware of any official crackdown. "The boss made it clear to us that we will work without a hitch because he had settled things with the forest service," Ndoci, the logger, said. "There, [on the slopes of Feza Mountain] where we cut wood, nobody comes to check."

*Elvis Nabolli is a journalist with TV 1 in Shkodra. Balkan Insight is BIRN's online publication. The investigation was supported by the Danish association of investigative journalism, FUJ, under its SCOOP programme.*