



## A WWF perspective on ISO 14001

**F**ive years after the first ISO 14000 standards were published, what benefits can we see from the point of view of a conservation organization such as WWF (World Wide Fund For Nature)? It is hard to give a definitive answer to this question.

On the one hand, there are periodic incidents such as the recent case of a well-known tyre manufacturer that was producing defective and dangerous tyres despite being certified to ISO standards for both environmental and quality management systems. Similarly a report published last year noted that:

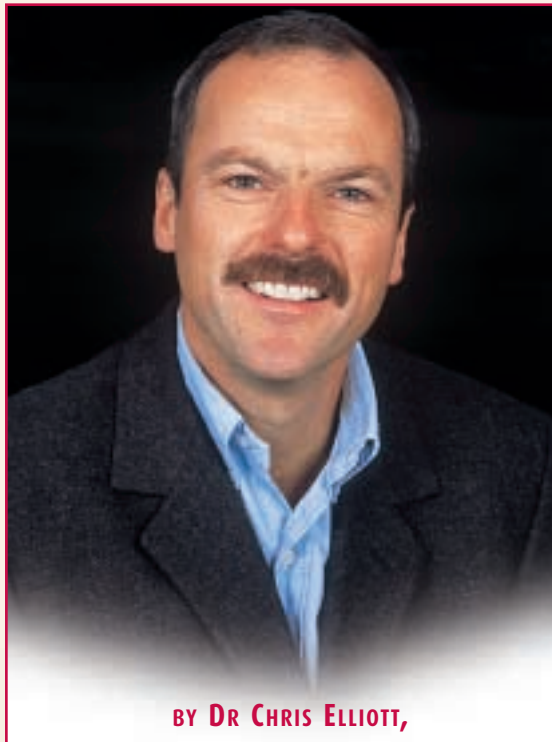
"A US EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance study of 133 ISO 14001-certified facilities in the United States found that approximately 20% had significant environmental violations for 1995 to 1997. Of those significant violations, the study found that

63% were in significant violation for a period of a year or more."<sup>1)</sup>

On the other hand, as a forester I have had the opportunity to see from the inside how a number of the innovative forest products companies we cooperate with have obtained ISO 14001 certification as part of a company-wide effort to improve their environmental performance.

### Complementary approach

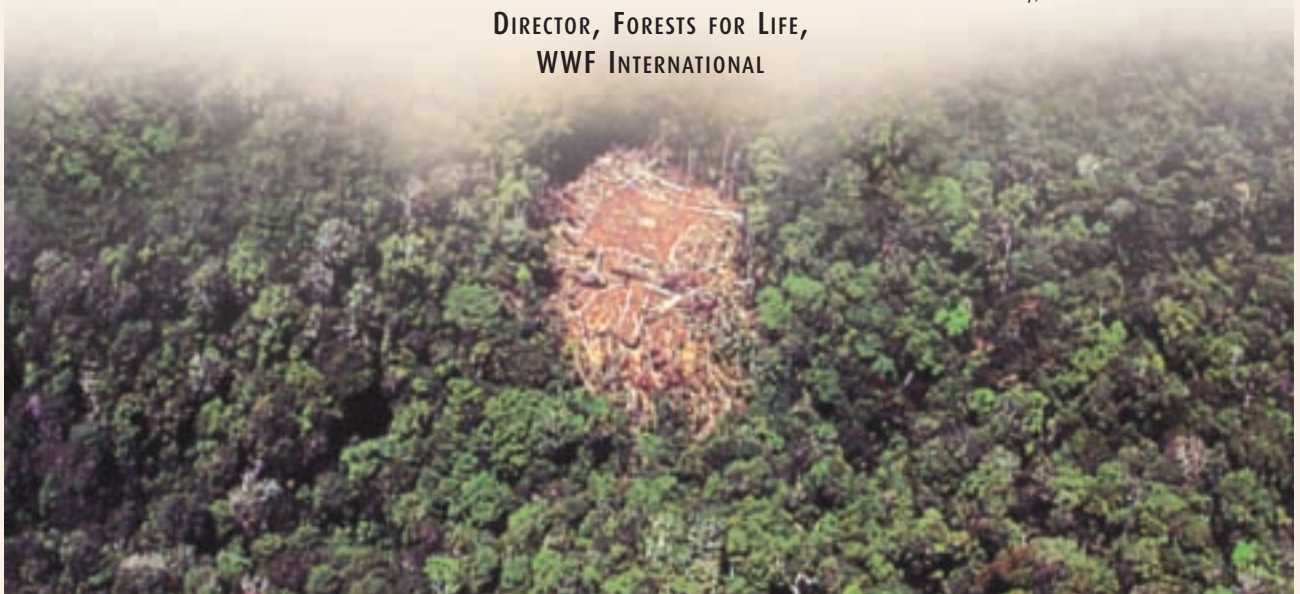
In some cases, these companies have obtained performance-based certification under the auspices of the Forest Stewardship Council at the same time as seeking ISO 14001 systems-based certification. This has proved to be a complementary approach. In these cases, the staff I have talked to cite the key benefit of ISO 14001



BY DR CHRIS ELLIOTT,

DIRECTOR, FORESTS FOR LIFE,  
WWF INTERNATIONAL

1) Morrison J., Kao Cushing K., Day Z. & Speir J. (2000). *Managing a better environment: Opportunities and Obstacles for ISO 14001 in Public Policy and Commerce*, Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, Oakland.



certification as being creating a culture in which employees are encouraged to seek ways of minimizing environmental impacts.

Perhaps the best answer to the opening question is to say that it depends entirely on how the standards are used. If they are used as intended by their authors, as part of a broad, coherent, corporate environmental strategy, they should be useful, particularly to larger companies running complex operations.



**If ISO 14001 certificates are used by unscrupulous or misinformed organizations as an ecolabel, ISO's own credibility will suffer**

If, on the other hand, ISO 14001 certification is used for "greenwashing" to imply environmental improvement which does not actually occur, we cannot expect any benefits.

In this regard, ISO could help improve the situation in two ways. Firstly, by tightening up the rules on how companies which have received ISO 14001 certification can use this information in advertising and communications. If ISO 14001 certificates are used by unscrupulous or misinformed organizations as an ecolabel, ISO's own credibility will suffer.

Secondly, by improving transparency and participation in ISO's standard-setting processes. ISO leaves this up to national standards bodies, but the latter's track record or reaching out to the range of stakeholders who are involved in environmental issues is uneven at best.

In WWF's view, setting standards on an issue such as the environment requires much broader inputs and participation than ISO's more traditional standard-setting work. It could be argued that this is not ISO's job, but in this case, ISO should perhaps consider working in close collaboration with organizations such as the Marine Stewardship Council and

the Forest Stewardship Council which are developing sector-specific performance standards through multi-stakeholder standards-setting processes. ■



**Setting standards on an issue such as the environment requires much broader inputs and participation than ISO's more traditional standard-setting work**

WWF International,  
Avenue du Mont Blanc,  
1196 Gland, Switzerland.

Tel. + 41 22 364 9003.  
Fax: + 41 22 364 0640.  
E-mail [celliott@wwfint.org](mailto:celliott@wwfint.org)  
Web [www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)

