

Forests for the Commonwealth

By JIM BALL

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JIM BALL was educated at Edinburgh and Oxford Universities. He began his professional career in 1963 in south-west Uganda where he served for five years as District Forest Officer before moving to Kenya. In 1974 he joined the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Nigeria as Project Manager, later becoming Programme Coordinator with a World Bank forestry programme, until 1983 when he was transferred to Sudan. In 1991 he moved to FAO headquarters, in Rome, as technical officer for forest plantations, and was subsequently promoted to Director with responsibility for communications and external matters before assuming his current role.

In an age of increasing urbanisation it would be easy to think that forests are merely part of the rural landscape – their management and conservation being far less important than the development of towns and cities. But this could not be further from the truth. We are at a critical point in determining the capabilities of the Earth to sustain the lives of an ever-expanding human population and forests play a vital role in our future.

Forests cover one-third of the Earth's land area and perform vital environmental functions to help maintain our climate and water supply. They are home to half of terrestrial species, and provide shelter and livelihoods to 60 million indigenous people, while contributing to the livelihood of a further 1.6 billion people. The use of wood for domestic energy is increasing in all Commonwealth countries, especially in developing economies, with India consuming the most wood fuel in the world. Trade in products from forests amounts to more than US\$400 billion per year, much of which is industrial wood, with New Zealand, Malaysia, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Solomon Islands being the principal exporters of roundwood.

The consequences of poor management of forests, including forest degradation and species loss, affects severely the livelihoods of people who depend on forests for their survival. The negative effects on the global climate are all now evident and will get worse if policy-makers do not take urgent action to amend harmful policies and introduce incentives to safeguard the future of forests.

The Commonwealth Forestry Association (CFA) works throughout the Commonwealth – and beyond – to promote the wise management of trees and forests. We do this in five main ways.

First, we publish world-class science via our peer-reviewed forestry journal, the *International Forestry Review*, in which the most up-to-date research results are produced. Second, we facilitate networking of professional members and organisations and exchange of knowledge via our quarterly newsletter, website, Facebook page and Twitter feed. Third, we encourage professional excellence and promote career development using a range of awards, such as the Queen's Award for Forestry, the Young Forester Award and the Young Scientist

Research Award. Fourth, we carry out a range of specific training and networking projects in the field that have been identified by our membership. And fifth, we promote capacity building by helping to organise training courses, workshops, and conferences.

We also recognise that ideas about wise forest management need to be discussed and decisions taken at a policy level. We address this through our role as the home to the secretariat for the Standing Committee on Commonwealth Forests (SCCF) an organisation which comprises representatives of all of the forest departments from throughout the Commonwealth and provides a unified voice on forestry matters to governments and international meetings. The SCCF also organises the Commonwealth Forestry Conference every four years which provides a forum for foresters from throughout the Commonwealth to meet and discuss issues, and at that time we publish the overview paper *Commonwealth Forests*, which describes the state of the Commonwealth's forests at that time.

The main issues that face foresters include how to transform the widely-recognised importance of forests to the Commonwealth into financial value. The recent REDD+ initiative has enabled governments to look at how they can safeguard the future of forests while at the same time unlocking their value. Through political support and environmentally friendly financial incentives for development we need to create a future where forests are recognised as being vital for the future of the planet.

More than half of the world's population now live in cities and towns – indeed all of those living in Singapore and Nauru do, while in England only 17 per cent of the land is classified as urban, yet over 80 per cent of the population live in urban areas. The paradox of our increasing urbanisation is increasing dependence on trees and forests, not just for the products they give but also for their services, including recreation, while the people themselves are less and less aware of rural issues and those concerning forests in particular. The CFA is working to ensure that everyone – whether city-dweller or dweller in the countryside – is aware of the benefits of forests and work together to safeguard their future.