



From Latin America to Asia

An International Forester Reflects on a Long Career
and the Future Ahead

An Interview with Prof. Wil de Jong





Forests have played a central role in my professional life. What constitutes a forests or not is debated. I see beauty and functionality in many types of forests, including these pine forests in Florida, USA.



My work has given me family across oceans, continents and cultures. This has without doubt been the greatest gift. Family outing Iquitos, Peru.



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An International Forester Reflects on a Long Career and the Future Ahead

An Interview with Prof. Wil de Jong

Wil de Jong (Professor CSEAS)
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Yusuke Murakami (Professor CSEAS)
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Wil de Jong has consistently conducted research in the forestry sector that is centered on local people and local community throughout his over 30-year career. At the same time, he has challenged the wider framework of national and international policies as well as legal and social regimes, focusing on natural resource issues and climate change while still emphasizing local realities. He has extensive knowledge of forestry across the globe, having conducted research in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. He has collaborated with many experts, including researchers, NGO partners, and international organizations all around the world.

Natsuho Fujisawa (NF) Thank you for giving us this opportunity to hear about your experiences. As I conduct research on small communities in the forests of Panama, I find it difficult to broaden my arguments and implications to the international level, so I am looking forward to hearing your experience, which would give me and other researchers many suggestions for future research. First, I want to ask about the starting point of your research. Why did you choose the forestry sector and what was the original

objective or motivation for your research? Why did you study the Peruvian Amazon, what was so attractive about that area?

Early Study and Fieldwork

Wil de Jong (WD) I think it has to do with the fact that I grew up in a very small village in the Netherlands in a rural area, in the countryside. By the time I was 11 years old I was already doing part-time jobs, working for farmers, people who were growing trees for gardens, and so forth.



I spent a lot of time as a young child in the forest, because I lived in an area with forests. We had forest in front of our house and forest behind it, so from a very young age, I was really engaged with nature and plants. When it came time to decide what to study, I decided this was my field and I went to the best-known agriculture university in the Netherlands.

At university, we first had to do one introductory year, and then in the second year I decided to major in forestry. I studied forestry for three years, mainly focusing on the Netherlands. I did the fieldwork for my first thesis in forests in the Netherlands, measuring big trees and small trees in the mornings in very cold weather and snow. Because it was required for us to do six months of further fieldwork, I decided I wanted to see other parts of the world. By then I had already decided that I wanted to go to South America, mainly because I thought that it was a cool place to go, not really because I wanted to do research there. My professor found me a place to go to in Peru. I still remember that I left the Netherlands on the 29th of February 1982. I think that's one of the reasons why all the things that happened afterwards happened, because it was such an unusual date. After all, the 29th of February only happens every four years.

That was the first time that I ever got on a plane, to go to Peru and start my fieldwork. The fieldwork was supposed to last for six months, but I stayed in Peru for six years. During those six years I did not go back to the Netherlands. I ended up working with a very nice forester, a man who really wanted to study forests, the conditions of forests, and the changes in forests, but he was also very interested in the people living in forests and how they handled forests and what they did with the forests. I came to work with him, and through him I not only went to Iquitos, a major city in Peru, but also to the border between Columbia and Peru. We lived and worked with indigenous people, studying how people lived, how people used the forest, how they interacted with the forest, how they manage the forests. I did that for almost three years, and that really got me very interested in the topic. That's really where I learned and developed my passion for forests, for forests and people, and how people use, depend on, and manage the forests. That's how I got into this field.

Another thing that's also not unimportant is that just a few weeks after I arrived in Peru, I met my wife. We got to know each other, and once the six months I had intended to stay were over, I did not have

much incentive to go back, because I loved my work and I had met my wife.

Yusuke Murakami (YM) I noticed that after getting a bachelor's degree in silviculture you also got a bachelor's degree in philosophy. What motivated you to do that in addition to your specialty?

WD I think it has to do with my background. In the Netherlands I grew up a Catholic, so the whole issue of life and what is life about is something that came with me since I was young. I was interested in reading about philosophical topics even before I did the degree. I think it also had to do with the times I grew up in. In the 1970s when I was a secondary student when I went to university, people were talking about life issues, about well-being, about things like that. I must also say that at one point when I was studying silviculture, I was for a period a little bit bored, believe it or not. I was a little bit bored with silviculture, so I decided I wanted to do one year of something that really interested me, so I studied philosophy, which was very fascinating. But then after that I went to Peru and I re-found my passion for my core subject again.

NF Your research in Peru was on ethnobotany?

WD My research was sort of in between ethnobotany and anthropology, because I had to learn who were the people I was working with, what are their habits, what is their culture, what is their way of thinking, what is their way of talking about forests and nature, what is the role of nature in their lives, but also what is their philosophy of life and what role does nature play in that? Nature plays a very strong role—people have stories about where they came from, where they originated, and nature and forests and trees play very important roles in the stories that people tell among each other about where they came from and how they evolved. That is also something that

I had to try to understand and I learned by being there and I was fascinated by it.

From Peru to Indonesia

NF After spending about ten years in Peru, you expanded your research field to Asian countries, especially Indonesia. Why did you do that?

WD That had to do with the people I worked with. I basically had three employers when I was in Peru. For the first 2.5 years I worked with the local university, then I worked one year for the Ministry of Agriculture doing very much the same thing, that is, going to a different village, studying the local use of trees and local agroforestry systems. In my third job, I ended up with people from the New York Botanical Garden who had a project in Peru collaborating with a Peruvian partner. I was hired under that project to do research for two years, again in a different place in the Peruvian Amazon. After their project was over, the woman who had hired me gave me an opportunity to go to New York. So after being in the Peruvian jungle I went to the New York jungle for almost three years. I finished my PhD there, and then the same people I had been working with had a new



Natsuho Fujisawa

project in Indonesia. I managed to raise funding from different sources and I also went to Indonesia, to the island of Borneo. I lived there for three years, going to the forest, to the interior, again studying how people use forests, how people interact with forests, and how people manage forests.

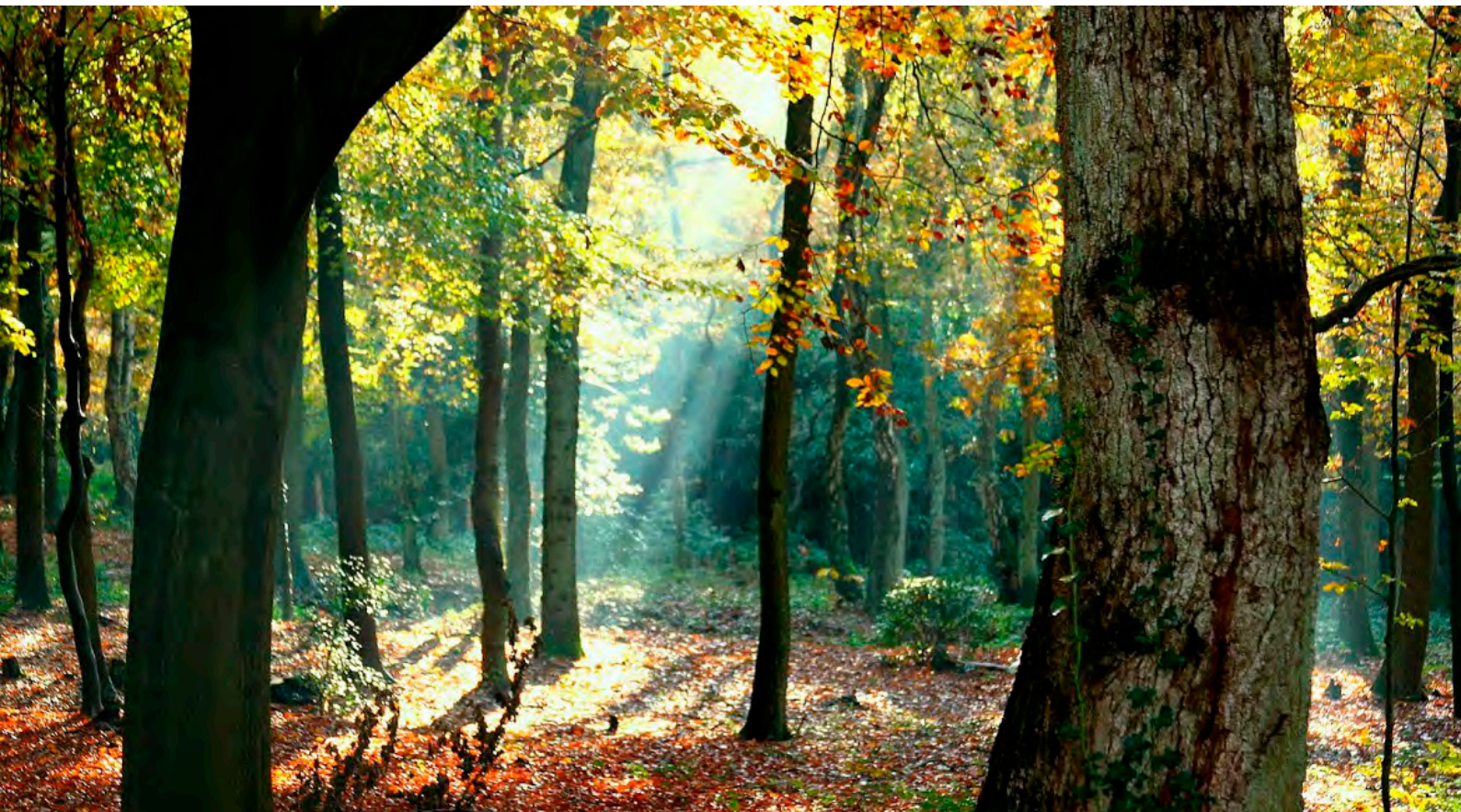
Already by then I could see differences between Indonesia and Peru. In Indonesia, the role that the government plays in what happens to the forest is somewhat different. I saw much more the government promoting the exploitation and logging of forests, engaging with companies, allowing foreign companies to come into the forests—and the companies and the government have very complicated interactions with people and their forests. This issue was more evident in Indonesia; it became very apparent quite soon after I started working in Indonesia. And it was then that I started looking more at the policy side—both national policy and international processes—because the whole issue of what the Indonesian government did to facilitate the exploitation of forests was

also related to international issues. It was then that I broadened my attention not only from looking very closely at people and forests, but also to wider topics, issues, questions, and processes that were unfolding.

NF From this wider perspective, did you see many differences in the political structures of Indonesia and Latin America?

WD Yes, the politics are very different. One big difference is the political awareness and political presence of local people. The governments of Latin American countries are not very strong in terms of how they control or dominate. Different groups in the societies have more of a political presence in Latin America. Indigenous people, for example, have their own organizations and they are very vocal when government policies negatively affect them—they stand up, they have protest marches. You do not see this in Indonesia. The political presence of local people and how they are considered by governments is very different in quite a few Asian countries, or at least it was





especially when I worked in Indonesia in the early 1990s.

I stayed in Indonesia for 12 years, from 1992 to 2004. At the end of the 1990s, we had the ousting of the then President, President Suharto, who had been in power for over 30 years. When he was thrown out of office, big political changes swept the country. The people, who before had been very dominated by the government and those in power, became much more vocal. During the years that I was there, I could see those political changes also among indigenous people, who before had been very quiet and later became more aware and let their voices be heard much more than they had been doing before. Those were dramatic times, and we witnessed many marked changes in Indonesia during those years.

Changes in the Forestry Sector

NF What changed in terms of the forestry sector when the government structure [in Indonesia] so drastically changed?

WD After the Suharto regime was thrown out of office, the political situation in Indonesia changed a lot. Simultaneously, a whole process of change began unfolding in the forestry sector, both nationally and internationally. Not only in Indonesia, not only in Asia, but all over the world, you can see that there has been a change in the thinking on forests—thinking about who should decide what happens to forests, what should or should not happen to the forests, who should own them, and who has rights to them. Another very significant change is how people view the importance of forests—this has also changed dramatically over the years. In the 1980s when I first went to Peru and I was finding my feet as a scientist, many discussions about the importance of tropical forests centered around how important they are for biodiversity, for genetic resources. For quite a number of years there was a big push and a lot of international attention and campaigns to stop tropical deforestation. Then in the 1990s people began to feel that a lot of money had been spent on the problem

without much change, so attention moved away from forests. But then of course since the early 2000s, the whole issue of climate change has become a big international issue. We now know that the forests of the world are the largest repository of terrestrial organic carbon in the world. Tropical forests, forests in general, are still net absorbers of atmospheric carbon. While there is a lot of talk about deforestation and the carbon emissions that are caused by that, all the forests together still absorb more carbon than is emitted because of deforestation every year. Because of this recognition of the important role of forests in the global climate cycle and the importance of the carbon stored in forests, now the whole attention to forests has changed once again. For us as foresters, the 1980s and the early 1990s were boom years because we were very important to biodiversity protection. In the 1990s, nobody was paying much attention to us, so we were not really known. This has changed again now that everybody is talking about climate change and the critical role of forests to it.

Regional Comparisons and the Restoration of Forests

NF To tackle such a big global issue as climate change, what is the advantage of comparing Latin American and Asian forests?

WD It's important to recognize that when it comes to forests and people, forests and the roles they play in peoples' livelihoods, and the roles of forests in climate change, there are similarities between what is happening in Latin America, what is happening in Asia, and what is happening in Africa. However, the underlying causes, the reasons why forests are declining in different parts of the world, the problems and the forces behind those problems, the possibilities and what to emphasize to address those problems and to find solutions—these are very different depending on the place where you are. I think it's also important to recognize that, to some extent, quite a few Asian countries have been more effective in addressing deforestation. They've also had much more progress in restoring forests, in achieving forest restoration, which is a major



topic that everyone who is in forestry now talks about.

Forest restoration is not only a major topic discussed among foresters, but also where are all kinds of big international actors are focusing efforts to address the issue of forests and climate change. There is a significant difference if you look at the larger picture of what is happening with forests in Latin America and forests in Asia. If you look at forests as a very wide concept, including natural forests and planted forests, then on the Asian continent since the early 2000s, the forest has already been increasing. Even though you still have deforestation in countries like Indonesia and Myanmar, if you look at the whole continent, the total area of forest has been increasing since the early 2000s. That is basically because many countries, such as India, the Philippines, China, and Vietnam, have tried to address deforestation, but they have also heavily invested in trying to bring back forests, to restore forests.

To address deforestation and restore forests has proven much more difficult in countries like Brazil and Peru. For instance, in Brazil deforestation is a hot topic and many of us who have been involved in forestry issues have been to numerous conferences and participated in numerous campaigns. We have met indigenous leaders who said, “we have to preserve the forest,” and for quite some time, from the early 2000s until mid 2015, deforestation in Brazil was declining. It was still deforesting, but at a slower rate than in years before. Now, however, it has gone the other way again. For the past two or three years you’ve seen again a very serious increase in deforestation in Brazil. This is really an issue of national policy. It has to do with how the Brazilian government, the Brazilian president—who of course is supported by a big part of the population—how they think about what is important for them. It is not simply about economic development, but also private interests. There is an important economic sector in Brazil that just wants

to make money, and one way to make money is to go to the tropical forest region and chop down a big area of forest and plant soybeans or grow cattle there. For the last three or four years, the president who is in charge now, Bolsonaro, and his government, has very much promoted that again, so now we have deforestation rapidly increasing in Brazil. We do not see this in Asian countries like India, China, Vietnam, or the Philippines. In these countries, governments are aware that of course they need economic growth, which includes agriculture production and the natural sector, but forests should be taken care of because they are important for many things—not just for the country’s international image, not only to meet international commitments and contribute to global efforts to address climate change, but they are also nationally important. I think that in Asia there is an awareness that taking care of forests is a good thing for the countries themselves.

International Connections

- NF** How has your research contributed to the awareness of the global forest situation, especially since you came to Kyoto?
- WD** I have now done research for about 35 years. Since I came to Japan in 2004, I have continued doing research—I have studied and written papers, which is something that I love to do. I have also been able to connect to more people in countries that I had not been to before. Before coming to Japan, I had been working in Vietnam and Indonesia and a little bit in Africa, as well as Bolivia and Peru, for many years. When I came to Japan, I continued working in those countries, but I also started working in China and in India, which course was very, very fascinating. Japan is also a fascinating country, so I was really happy to come to Japan and live in Japan and experience Japan and learn about Japan and come to understand it a little.



Working in India and China was one of the major privileges I've had since I came to Japan. Through that I have been able to make new connections with and between different scientists from different parts of the world. Two years ago (in 2018) we held a workshop in Cusco, Peru. Cusco is a very famous old Inca capital of Peru; it is very pretty with a lot of ancient architecture. The workshop included people from China and Korea together with people from Latin America. We talked about similar issues across 33 different cultures, and that was very fascinating. A very good friend of mine from China went with us to Cusco and as we walked around through Cusco, he began giving me all kinds of comments about what he thought about Peru, about the problems there, and about the possible solutions for Peru. This kind of experience and exchange of viewpoints is invaluable.

I have also been able to connect with people in India, being part of a project that brings together people from China, India,

and other countries here in the region. Making such international linkages has been one of the good things that came out from my years here in Japan. I think I've also, to a modest extent, been able to make Japan, Japanese research, and Japanese science in my field a little bit better known among the circles that I usually travel in. People know that I live and work in Japan, and they ask me about my work. I also sometimes introduce my institute. We have been able to establish some connections between scientists here and scientists from elsewhere. I think that's also some of the modest achievements that we have accomplished in terms of promoting Japan and the Japanese science community, which we should continue to do more of.

NF Yes, I feel that here in Japan there are only a small number of researchers conducting research on tropical forests in Latin America especially from the social aspects. You have motivated us on that topic in Japan.

Challenges and Privileges

NF What was the biggest challenge or difficulty, and also what was the biggest pleasure, throughout the course of your career, either personally or in terms of your research?

WD What was the biggest challenge? Well, there's been a few. I think it was eventually becoming somewhat of a higher profile scientist. I went to Peru when I was a student from the Netherlands. I was abrasive, but modest. I managed to adapt to the local situation. I could go about my business and deal well with people, you know as I have my natural charm, so I could accommodate to various places and do my work and find friends and life was reasonably OK, with the usual ups and downs. But once I started to become better known as a scientist, eventually you are being asked and invited as a person who has a certain experience, who has a certain career, who has a certain prestige, which gradually increases. That is something that you have to get used to. You have to change your behavior, you have to be a bit more careful, you have to be a bit more diplomatic—a lot more diplomatic—which for somebody from the Netherlands is not easy, because it's not in our nature to be diplomatic. I guess many of my colleagues here know about that (laughing). It's something that I really had to get used to. It was a role and also a responsibility that I had to first realize, understand, and also be able to accommodate myself to. I think that was really the major challenge of being this sort of migrating scientist, going to different places in the world and living and working in different places in the world.

Tomohiro Machikita (TM) You recently have been a co-editor of a volume on forests and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). What was the biggest challenge in editing and collecting the chapters from several authors?



WD If you do a book like the one that we did, which has 18 chapters and over 600 pages, the biggest challenge is to make sure that the authors finish their chapters within the allotted time. That is the biggest challenge. But each chapter is part of the wider project. When you do a book like that, you have to invest a lot of time in making sure that everybody who is part of doing the book more or less has the same idea of what the book is about, what you want to achieve with the book, and where you want it to go. Everyone needs to know the objective and therefore how each chapter needs to be. And that takes time. It's not impossible, but it depends very much on the group you are working with, because if you start a book like that you have to first have a small group who develops the idea and then you have to find authors who want to contribute a chapter, who then also have to organize their own group of authors to come to the chapter. There is a process of discussing this and you have to give it enough time, space, opportunity, and flexibility to accommodate ideas, to let the project go in a direction that eventually everybody thinks is the best direction. That is something that really takes time. Once you have reached an agreement, then having the authors finish their chapters is the biggest challenge. It is usually the chief editor who is the one who has to go and use the whip to eventually make it happen. I am now also the editor of a

new book and also a contributing author with a few co-authors on the topic of forest restoration. The deadline for our chapter was November 30 [speaking on December 7], and I still have not sent in my chapter, even though I'm an editor of the book! So that shows you how difficult it is.

NF How about the greatest pleasure of your career?

WD Oh, the pleasures, yes. Really one of the greatest privileges that I've had, and I realize it more and more, is that I have been able to go to all those different places and live in places and eventually learn to recognize how people are in the place where they live, how they think, how they feel, how they act, how they relate. You do that in one place and do that again in another place, and then do it all over again, realizing that if you do it a second

time, you've learned how to do it. You have learned how to understand people, how to recognize a language, how to recognize a culture, how to recognize a mentality, how to recognize social codes. If you go to the second place, that set of experiences is something you take with you and you can use to fit in—or at least live—wherever you go next. When you go on to the third place and the fourth place, the experience and perspective grows. And every now and then you realize that, yes, it is a skill, but it's more than a skill, it is a personal development that you have gone through, and that is really very rewarding to realize. It is a privilege that I have had that in my life. That is really the biggest pleasure I've had, having the career that I've had.

NF Can you choose which place has most affected you?

WD That's a difficult one. After having been in Peru for six years, during the first six months or so in Indonesia I was still kind of like a Dutch person adapted to the Peruvian culture. I really had to understand that "ok, things are different here." I had to ask, how are they different and how do I need to do things differently? Nowadays when I go to a train station in the Netherlands and when the train is coming and people are standing around, I think, "my God, what is this, what kind of chaos is this?" I am now so used to getting on a train in Japan, where people line up in such a nice and orderly fashion, that I think the Netherlands is chaotic. So Japan has also changed me quite a bit. Japan has also made me a different person than I was before. I would say the place that probably most affected me has been Peru, because it was the first time where I was exposed to a very different culture, plus I met my wife there, so my life in Peru was very socially and culturally intense. Yet I look at my years here in Japan and I realize that I am a different person now than when I came here in 2004. So, they all have changed me to a fair degree.





Future Plans and Suggestions

NF I'm sure that you will actively continue engaging in tropical forest research in the future. Could you tell me your research goals or what you aim to achieve in the near future?

WD I still have a few ongoing projects. I have been working with a group of people who are part of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations, or IUFRO. Although its headquarters are in Vienna, it is an organization that has members all over the world. We are doing a big project on forest restoration that basically started this year and will continue for quite a few years. I may also want to do a bit more teaching in years to come. When I was here at Kyoto University, I once taught a course for the international program. I have also been teaching summer courses at Renmin University of China for the last five years. I want to try to continue to do that, either in the Netherlands or in China, or maybe somewhere in Japan if there would be an opportunity. I would

like to engage with students, to share my experiences, tell stories about all the things that have happened to me.

I would hope that I can also continue to keep contacting and collaborating with colleagues here in Japan. I think it would be good for the Center for Southeast Asian Studies to continue and expand work in the Latin American part of the pacific region. If that region could be added more substantially in addition to the center's focus, very rich experience, knowledge, and expertise on Southeast Asia, that would be very good, because as I hope is clear from my story here, having comparative opportunity with Latin America creates new opportunities and opens one's perspectives. Comparative study allows for whole new ways of thinking on certain topics, because although similar processes are taking place across various places in the world, those processes have their own dynamics and manifestations. Being able to have such broad-based expertise in one single center would be invaluable, so my hope is that the expansion into Latin America

Area Environments and Global Sustainability Challenges

"Area Environments and Global Sustainable Challenges" promotes research that links area studies with contemporary global environmental challenges. Contemporary sustainability challenges relevant for area studies include: climate change; global, regional, national and local food security; dwindling energy supply; degrading landscapes; loss of agricultural production capacity; declining rural livelihoods and loss of biodiversity. "Area Environments and Global Sustainable Challenges" assumes linkages between these global challenges and what is typically the focus of area studies. Contributing projects explore local and regional environmental dynamics that are relevant for global sustainability challenges.



will continue and grow in years to come.

NF Finally, you have shared that tropical forests can largely contribute to sustainable development. In order to encourage more of such contribution, what should future scholars of the forestry sector focus on? Do you have some suggestions or requests for the younger generation, especially in Japan?

WD What is increasingly important to research on international forestry is something that is already happening, but also needs to happen more: this is good international exchange and international collaboration. We need to examine and improve the relationships and interactions among scientists. When I look at what is happening in Southeast Asia and how scientists interact with each other, the linkages are different in Europe or Latin America. There are quite unique interactions and linkages between Latin American and North American scientists, whereas scientists in Europe have a bit more awareness of and confidence in a community of scientists. I think in Asia and Southeast Asia, there is not yet the same type of conceptualization or confidence of all being of one group who talk to each other from the same level. It still something that is growing. In Asia the climate is still politically sometimes very delicate. You have big players and small players and political interests, and how scientists talk to each other is influenced by those factors. I think also there is still an issue of capacity, training, and education, how it's happening in different parts of the world—that plays a role. If we can improve how scientists talk to each other and how they feel about themselves when they meet, then we can also increase the contributions of science to addressing environmental problems and deforestation and thereby the contribution that forests can have to all kinds of international challenges.

As far as young scientists, and especially Japanese young scientists, of course now I have to be very careful what

Sustainable Development Goals: Their Impacts on Forests and People

Edited by Pia Katila, Carol J. Pierce Colfer, Wil de Jong, Glenn Galloway, Pablo Pacheco and Georg Winkel

I say (laughing). I've recently been looking at Masters programs in international forestry in Asia in Europe, and I see that in Europe there is a good infrastructure. For instance, students from any European country can enroll in a sustainable tropical forest Masters program in which they attend one university for one year and another university for the next year. There are all sorts of exchange mechanisms. Of course it needs to be organized, which is not an easy thing, but from what I see, such programs are incredibly enriching, and they are set up to be incredibly enriching. The people who design these programs envision students going to various different places and talking to each other, to know each other, build networks, learn from scientists or lecturers from one university and learn from lectures in a totally different university on the other side of the continent—such students are people who, once they finish their Masters, have a richness not only in knowledge, but also in their understanding of how different people talk about the topic differently, which is really very valuable and enriching. There are small efforts of a similar nature here

in Asia. I know that in China there is an organization trying to facilitate Master studies for forestry professionals in the Asia-Pacific region. It's not really as ambitious as the European program, but it is happening. If I would be given the opportunity to try to set up a similar program, it would be for students not only from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Myanmar (who are mostly the people who go to China), but for students from across Asia, including Korea and Japan, would have opportunities to participate in a program where they go to different countries and do six months or one year in one place and then go to another place. If this could be done, it is something that really opens one's mind. It gives you the kinds of experiences, a little bit like the ones I had, that allow you to feel confident when going to a totally different place. So that during the first three months, you might have no idea what is going on, but you know that you will understand, and you will be able to live there and function there. I would recommend these kinds of programs. I think they can be tremendously useful.

TM What is your “must-have” gear in the field, which items do you always bring to the field?

WD I used to tell people that when I packed my suitcase for my travels, the first thing that I put in there was my tennis racket. I would say though that my main tool really is my computer—my computer and my brain are the most important tools to take to the field.





**Center for Southeast Asian Studies,
Kyoto University**

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