

Interview with Barney Chan

Barney Chan attended his first Council session in May 1990 as a member of the Malaysia delegation and a representative of the Malaysian Timber Organization, and he has attended almost every session since. He is chair of the Trade Advisory Group (TAG)



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

What are the most important achievements of the Council over the period of your involvement?

There are too many achievements to name, but two stand out: the excellent series of technical guidelines, and the innovative criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of natural tropical forests [C&I].

On a more personal level, the setting up of TAG and the Civil Society Advisory Group was also an important achievement; it allowed “traditional enemies” to work together, as well as with the Council. Today, the engagement between non-governmental organizations [NGOs] and the tropical timber trade is much more constructive than it was in the early days, when many NGOs and activists were working to ban logging in the tropics and ITTO was new to the international forestry scene. Demonstrations were common in Council sessions in the early 1990s; activists agitated outside while the meetings went on behind closed doors and security guards.

What were the impacts of these achievements?

The groundbreaking C&I, published in July 1992, represented a systematic approach to the complexities of tropical forestry. This influenced the way in which other intergovernmental organizations approached tropical forestry in later years. More importantly, it allowed producer countries to understand and work towards sustainable forest management [SFM].

What are the major strengths and weaknesses of the Council?

The partisan nature of the ITTO membership—consumers and producers—is the Council’s strength as well as its weakness. Two sides of the same coin. This arrangement produces intense and focused discussions, but it also reveals the divergent interests of the two groups. This disparate approach makes it difficult and even problematic for the two camps to agree on some problems in forestry and the timber trade.

How do you see the future role of the Council?

The international spotlight first shone on tropical forests in the 1980s. Then it focused on “sustainability”, which eventually moved to “timber certification” and then evolved into “legality”. These last few years, “climate change” has been the priority.

In my opinion, the Council did not follow the spotlight well, although it started brilliantly in “sustainability”, with cornerstone work and publications on SFM. The Council dropped the certification baton and could not find the legality baton. Has Council got the climate-change baton?

Despite urging in earlier years by TAG, the Council chose not to work on timber certification and legality. As it turned out, other international organizations stepped into our shoes and took those challenges away from us. ITTO missed two golden opportunities to make a huge impact on tropical forestry. In Libreville in November 2013, TAG again urged the Council to step up or risk being pushed aside by others. TAG said: “ITTO might become a spectator on the international stage, and we will all just sit on the sidelines and watch others play the game of tropical forestry”.