

Out on a limb



How ITTO began

WAR DOES STRANGE THINGS to people. In the case of Katsuhiko Kotari, one of ITTO's founding fathers, it gave him a lifelong concern for tropical forestry.

Graduating in 1941, Mr Kotari's forestry career was put on hold as Japan fought the Allies in World War II. He was shipped to an anti-aircraft battery located in Rabaul on the New Guinean island of New Britain. He didn't know it at the time, but fighting for the enemy in the South Pacific was Australian Alf Leslie, another of ITTO's founding fathers.

"We probably shot at each other," says Mr Kotari. Fortunately for ITTO, they both missed. And they later became good friends.

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When the fighting ended, Mr Kotari returned to Japan armed with books on the trees of New Guinea and a concern for their management that would later find expression in an international treaty. This article presents Mr Kotari's version of events leading up to the first International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA) in 1983, and his views on ITTO as it enters its 20th year.

The changing timber economy

After the war, Mr Kotari worked in Japan's Forestry Agency until 1958, when he retired from the agency. He had worked mainly in the national forests, but increasingly his attention was drawn to the global arena. Japan's economy was booming. Log imports—from Southeast Asia, the USA and Russia—were escalating at an extraordinary rate. It was a time of rapid change in the international forestry sector. Yet most Japanese foresters remained focused on the national forests, and not many knew much about international issues.

Mr Kotari travelled frequently to Europe, Russia,

and East and West African countries, as well as to various parts of Asia, studying their forests and timber sectors. Some of these countries were in the process of winning their independence from colonial powers, and Mr Kotari was interested in how that would affect the timber trade. He also visited Brazil, because he recognized the importance of the Amazon in the future timber supply.

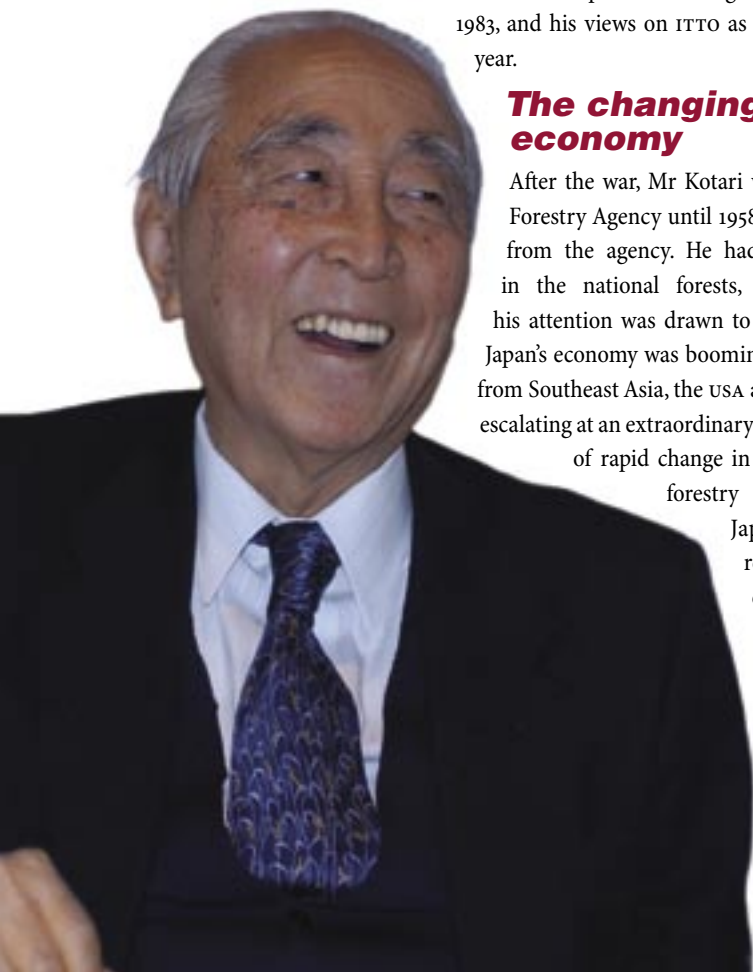
The more he studied the situation overseas, the more he worried about the policy of many developed countries, particularly Japan, towards the tropical timber trade and its effect on developing countries. He realised that the new industrial style of logging was doing enormous damage to tropical forests and the social fabric of those countries, without really benefiting their economies, and he also knew that Japanese demand would not decrease in the near future. Something needed to be done.

In 1973 a meeting was held by the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (later to become the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific—ESCAP) that was to shape the future development of international forest policy.

"At that meeting, the problem of log exports/imports was discussed," says Mr Kotari. "It was a difficult meeting, because many countries were against Japan and its policy of importing logs from producer countries. We were buying mainly in log form and then converting the logs within Japan to other uses such as plywood. This meant that most of the profits and economic benefits went to Japan, while the producer countries were destroying their forests."

At that meeting, says Mr Kotari, many of the elements that were to become tenets of ITTO were discussed—such as wood-product research, technology transfer, forest industry development, improving forest management, capacity-building, and market transparency.

A year earlier, in 1972, the Club of Rome had published its report *Limits to growth*, which predicted that the world would start running out of resources as its population and consumption increased. Saburo Okita was a member of the Club of Rome. He was a man of very high standing both within and outside Japan, as well as



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a close friend and mentor of Mr Kotari. The two met to discuss Japanese international forest policy, and in 1974 were instrumental in the establishment of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan's main overseas development agency. Mr Kotari was offered the job of creating and leading a section within JICA on agriculture and forestry. However, he wanted to maintain his freedom of speech and declined the offer, although he did later become an (unpaid) advisor to the organisation in order to work to increase Japan's overseas development assistance.

Meanwhile, countries in the European Community were becoming concerned about logging in Africa, particularly by European-owned companies. A critical mass was building towards increased international cooperation on the tropical timber trade. During the fourth session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development in Nairobi in 1976, agreement was reached on an Integrated Program for Commodities. This stipulated that agreements for 18 specified commodities—including tropical timber—would be negotiated or renegotiated with the principal aim of avoiding excessive price fluctuations and stabilising commodity prices at levels remunerative to the producers and equitable to consumers. Agreements were quickly concluded for some of these—such as jute and sugar—but an agreement on tropical timber proved much more problematic.

"Tropical timber was an unusual type of commodity," says Mr Kotari. Unlike most others, tropical timber was far from uniform in quality, distribution or end-use—the variety was virtually endless. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, tropical timber was derived largely from natural forests and it became increasingly difficult to ignore questions related to the sustainability of the resource base. Globally, tropical deforestation and degradation were starting to generate widespread concern.

"You could not treat timber separately from its source, the forest," says Mr Kotari. "But this was a new concept for a commodity agreement; inevitably, negotiations for an agreement were likely to be protracted."

So it proved. It took ten years before an agreement came into effect (in 1986). Even then it took a concerted effort by a number of independent visionaries, such as Mr Kotari, Alf Leslie, Terence Hpay and Duncan Poore, to bring it into being.

To what effect?

"In 1985, FAO decided to establish something called the Tropical Forest Action Plan (TFAP)," said Mr. Kotari. "Everyone thought this was a good idea, but it was about developing plans, which then had to be implemented. In 1992, the TFAP evolved into national forest action programs, which were to be implemented by governments with the support of the international community. ITTO not only

makes policies, it actually helps countries to implement them. This is the importance of ITTO."

Even this assistance is not enough, though, says Mr Kotari.

"The gap between developed and developing countries is not growing smaller," he says. "So it's very important that cooperation between countries grows, not diminishes. A little bit of self-sacrifice from developed countries is needed. If one country says 'we want to keep the status quo', or 'we want to grow even richer at the expense of others', then the gap won't get smaller, it will get bigger. And this is not good for the planet. Therefore, increasing the financial contributions by developed countries for the implementation of country-level projects is a priority for ITTO."

Mr Kotari has been influential in the negotiation of all three of the ITTAs agreed so far (1983, 1994 and 2006). He is the only person to have served as a delegate at all three negotiations. According to Manoel Sobral, ITTO's current executive director, Mr Kotari has played a vital role.

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"Mr Kotari has been a close friend and advisor both to me and to my predecessor, Dr Freezailah," he says. "We have benefited very much from his strategic view. Particularly during the negotiations of the agreement, he was extremely important in identifying paths and ways towards consensus."

Consensus underpins not only the agreement, but also the operation of the Organization itself. This is the key to future success, says Mr Kotari.

"I was rather surprised by the heated discussions at the last round of negotiations," he says. "Nevertheless, of all the international meetings I've experienced, the atmosphere in ITTO is the most intimate. All members are able to express their views as equal partners. More than anything, perhaps, this goodwill must be nurtured and maintained if ITTO is to build on past achievements."

This Out on a limb was prepared by Alastair Sarre based on an interview with Katsuhiko Kotari in March 2006.