

# Passing of a forester

**Alf Leslie, friend of ITTO and eminent forester, passed away earlier this year**

**A**lfred John (Alf) Leslie, who died in January 2009 aged 87, was one of the forestry profession's most original thinkers. Born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1921, he studied forestry at the School of Forestry at Creswick; his iconoclastic views of forestry were keenly sought, even towards the end of his life, both at home and internationally.

Leslie had early field-forestry postings in regional Australia and later held senior academic positions at the universities of Melbourne and Canterbury (New Zealand). In the 1960s and 70s, however, his interests and career diverged towards the tropics and developing countries. He became a protégé of Jack Westoby, who was then a leading advocate of what became known as sustainable development; the two of them were colleagues at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and worked together on forestry projects in many developing countries. Leslie later compiled *The Purpose of Forests*, a collection of Westoby's essays that became a classic, loved by foresters and environmentalists alike for the elegant way in which it challenged conventional thinking about forest-based development.

Leslie subscribed to Westoby's view that "forestry is concerned not with trees, but with how trees can serve people". He

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believed that, especially in the tropics, forests had to serve an economic purpose if they were to survive. He did not, however, favour intensive logging. Many tropical forests contain, at relatively low densities, timbers (such as teak and mahogany) that have such exceptional durability and decorative qualities that the demand for them is almost inelastic, meaning that consumers will always pay very high prices for them. The trick in tropical countries, according to Leslie, was to capture the value of those timbers closer to the forest so that local people could derive maximum benefit from them. He advocated what amounted to industrial espionage to determine who along the production chain was extracting most of the value of the timber—it certainly wasn't tropical forest owners and dwellers—and to raise the price paid by them. A focus on what he called 'diamond' timbers using intelligent marketing and environmentally sensitive extraction techniques such as helicopter logging would ensure that forests provided their owners and users with economic rewards at the same time as retaining virtually all their biodiversity and other environmental qualities.

Although the 'diamond' approach has never really been implemented in the tropics, Leslie's persistent and persuasive advocacy helped convince many international policymakers and environmentalists of the need for forests to pay their way. This view is reflected in ongoing negotiations over a new global climate-change agreement that would encourage payments to reduce deforestation and forest degradation and therefore cut down on green-house gas emissions. The diamond approach would be consistent with the need to conserve carbon in these forests; it might yet have a role to play in making carbon conservation forests socially and economically viable.

Leslie had another, far-reaching influence on international forest policy. He was one of a handful of individuals who, in the 1970s and early 1980s, fought for the creation of ITTO, a United Nations-based institution he believed was essential if the tropical timber sector was to play its proper role in development. He played an essential role in assisting ITTO's first Executive Director, Dr B.C.Y. Freezailah, establish the groundwork for the Organization's work following its establishment in 1986. He continued to assist the Organization in many key initiatives at the policy and field level over the years. He was never afraid to express ideas or opinions that some considered politically incorrect but which were hard to dispute due to his always cogent supporting arguments. According to ITTO's second Executive Director, Dr Manoel Sobral, "among those few people who can be considered the founding fathers of ITTO, Alf no doubt was the one [who made] the greatest intellectual contribution".

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Leslie was a lead author of the 1990 ITTO Sarawak Mission report, which was produced at a time when Sarawak was the centre of worldwide attention because of its destructive timber industry and the plight of the Penan forest people. The Mission report became a seminal work in the development of both ITTO and Sarawak's forest sector and helped diffuse tensions there. The University of Melbourne conferred a Doctor of Forest Science degree on Leslie in 1994 in recognition of his work in international forestry.

Leslie was a sceptic who delighted in an argument. In his speeches he often presented the conventional wisdom on a topic before expertly torpedoing the assumptions on which it was founded. He took delight in exposing flaws and gaps with the broad brush of a sceptical pragmatist, often supported by calculations made on the back of an envelope. He once wrote an essay titled 'Stupidity almost always wins', but he balanced his cynicism with humour and the demeanour of a real gentleman. He certainly had a strong pessimistic streak. In an article published in the *TFU* in 2006 he wrote:

"The only point about continuing to talk about SFM is to find a way around the conundrum that everybody says they want SFM but nobody wants to pay for it. If there is no answer, further talk won't find one. But talk serves a useful purpose for some: it creates the illusion that something is being done. Hence, in a world where illusion so often counts for more than reality, the combination of talk and inaction seems set to have a guaranteed future."

Nevertheless, when it came to personal interactions he was an optimist, and he had a positive influence on many lives. He had a gift of engaging the newly encountered, whether young or old and no matter their ethnic background or education, by joking about the ills of an organization or economy on an impersonal level. He could also point out the need to rethink ideas in a way that neither threatened nor embarrassed their proponents, and he encouraged young foresters to lift their aspirations, as many now in senior positions can attest. He was a gentleman in every respect; discourses were always lubricated with numerous cups of tea. Whatever the topic or concern, one left a discussion with him with a feeling that here was a person who listened, probed and cared, as well as counselled. He didn't suffer from false modesty. In 2005, at the age of 84 (and still working), he said: "I sometimes wonder if what I've got up here"—tapping his head—"is any good any more. Then I think, 'it's still better than most!'". He was right.

He is survived by his wife, Jean, two daughters and five grandchildren.

*Alf Leslie's family and the University of Melbourne's Department of Forest and Ecosystem Science are establishing a memorial grove of trees at the University's Creswick campus. To make a donation go to [www.itto.int](http://www.itto.int) and follow the links.*

*This obituary was put together by Ian Ferguson, Steve Johnson and Alastair Sarre with the assistance of many others. Variations have appeared in the International Forestry Review, The Melbourne Age, and other publications.*

### **Tribute by Katsuhiro Kotari**

I have known and been impressed by Mr Leslie throughout his distinguished international career and we also had the opportunity to work together over forty days in the ITTO Sarawak Mission between 1989 and 1990. I was much impressed by the depth of his knowledge of forestry issues. Also as the leader of the ITTO Fiji Mission in 2004, I remember Mr Leslie's enthusiasm as he provided valuable advice to the officials in Fiji for the future development of forestry in that country. During the busy schedule it seemed as though he was not in the best of his health, even going to the local hospital on occasion. I truly respected Mr Leslie for putting his utmost effort towards carrying out the mission.

Mr Leslie had told me that during World War II he frequently boarded the fighter planes in Port Moresby for the air raid of Rabaul. I had told him that I also served in the Japanese Navy as the head of the fort/battery of Rabaul. I recall how Mr Leslie and I had promised each other that when we retired from forestry we should reminisce about our days in Papua New Guinea. Now that it's not possible, I am filled with regret.

I would like to pray for the soul of Alfred John Leslie and also express my sincere regrets to his family whom I did not have the pleasure of meeting. I pray for their health and future happiness.



*Katsuhiro Kotari (pictured above) is a distinguished Japanese forester with a longstanding commitment to ITTO's objectives. Both men appreciated the irony of their collaborative efforts for ITTO over the years, given that they were both in or around Papua New Guinea serving their countries during World War II, when in all likelihood they had been shooting at each other.*