

Interview with Yoichi Suzuki

Ambassador Suzuki attended sessions of the International Tropical Timber Council in the early 1990s as director responsible for commodity issues in Japan's Foreign Ministry. He served as the Council's chair in 1994



Photo: Embassy of Japan in France

What were the major challenges the Council dealt with during your term as Council chair?

There were two major issues: the negotiation of the International Tropical Timber Agreement [ITTA] 1994, and discussions on the environmental aspects of tropical timber development. As you know, the ITTA was the first and probably only commodity agreement with important environmental components.

Describe the atmosphere in the Council at that time.

In spite of the touchy issues related to the environmental conservation of tropical forests and the inevitable issues related to the budget and the rationalization of the activities of the Secretariat as well as those of ITTO, the atmosphere was, in general, collaborative and friendly. I owed a lot to the constructive and strong leadership shown

by a certain number of delegates from both caucuses, as well as to the support provided behind the scene by Freddie [Dr Freezailah, the executive director at the time] and the members of the Secretariat.

Describe the major achievements of the Council under your leadership.

The major achievement was to reach substantive agreement on the ITTA 1994 and, through it, to improve further the balance between tropical timber production and the environmental aspect of tropical forest conservation. The reason is clear: without the ITTA 1994, ITTO would have ceased to exist, and Japan would have lost an important international organization based on its soil.

In your opinion, what have been the impacts of these achievements, and how have they affected the tropical forest/timber sector?

I have not been involved with ITTO directly since I left the chair, so my impressions may be misguided. But I would say that most, if not all, the commodity agreements are irrelevant today. The ITTA, an exception, maintains its relevance because it was able to transform with the ITTA 1994.

What do you see as the current and future role of the Council?

Today's world lives on past achievements as far as multilateral rule-setting is concerned. It has lost its capacity to come up with new multilateral frameworks or rules in the past decade or more. In some ways, tropical forests are global commons, and their development must be sustainable. I believe there is a lot of work to be done by the Council.



Environmental leader: The ITTA was "the first and probably only commodity agreement with important environmental components".

Photo: Baharuddin