

# Interview with Chen Hin Keong

**Chen Hin Keong is the leader of TRAFFIC's Global Forest Trade Programme. He attended his first session of the International Tropical Timber Council in 2001. He helped create the Civil Society Advisory Group (CSAG) in 2002 and is its current co-chair**



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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

The most important achievement of the Council from my perspective has been the formation of the CSAG. CSAG provides the Council with a voice from civil society; in particular it gives it a new perspective on gender and on land and forest tenure. It is vital that the Council has a body like CSAG to provide those inputs and to bring in different perspectives to the Council decision-making process. Forests are not solely about harvesting and trading timber; we are talking about much more, such as climate change and the whole suite of services and benefits of forests to the people living in forests or relying on forest resources. These have to be reflected in the Council's decisions, and that's why civil society has an important role to play in providing that voice.

## **What impacts has CSAG had on the Council?**

ITTO does a lot of good policy work, developing frameworks that member countries can use as guidance and for their own statutory purposes in the national context. For CSAG, the impact is in terms of ensuring that our interests and views are accepted and adopted within the guidelines and standards that ITTO has been developing. For example, I was involved through CSAG in the revision of the SFM guidelines<sup>1</sup>, and we were able to provide inputs to make sure that tenure issues, native customary rights, climate-change issues and other aspects that concern us—and which were basically absent from the original 1990 version—were captured in the new version.

A lot of people are interested in these issues, including governments, but certainly CSAG pushed hard to make sure that tenure, livelihoods and benefits for local communities and indigenous peoples were highlighted much more. We would like to think we made an impact, together with others. The second thing I think we can say we contributed to recently was the development of the current ITTO Strategic Action Plan, in which we had strong inputs.

## **In your view, what are the major strengths of the Council?**

The strength of the Council is that it is specific to tropical forests and it is the only platform that focuses solely on tropical forest issues. It brings together the consumers, producers and processors of tropical timber. If it does its job well, the Council should be able to channel its deliberations into other forums, like the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to feed in the perspectives and inputs of the tropical regions. And that is very important, I think. The current International Tropical Timber Agreement is quite encompassing, for example looking broadly at the services and benefits of tropical forests, so the deliberations of the Council should have considerable relevance in other related global forums.

## **What are its weaknesses?**

The Council sessions involve a lot of difficult negotiations, with the various parties often pushing in different directions, resulting in the watering down of some of the key issues. That's one of the main weaknesses. But a second weakness is that Council doesn't have the ability to sanction member countries. So even though it tries

<sup>1</sup> Voluntary guidelines for the sustainable management of natural tropical forests.



**Out in front:** Chen Hin Keong thinks the Council should be seen to be leading on certain key issues. *Photo: ANPM*

hard to adopt good policies and standards, such as the SFM guidelines, countries resist because of cost factors, the challenges they will create for their industries, or the difficulty of implementation and enforcement. The Council also operates at the international level and doesn't have strong links to the ground. On the other hand, a lot of projects are specific to particular sites, and governments do not take on recommendations in a holistic way at the national level and in a way that can be monitored.

ITTO's membership comprises practically all the countries in the tropical world and the Council potentially has a lot of leverage, but this is not always utilized. For example, the Council could have created something along the lines of the European Union Timber Regulation, the United States' Lacey Act and Australia's new Illegal Logging Prohibition Act, which are all about stopping illegal timber from entering countries, thus helping producer countries in combating illegal logging. Instead, now these things have been done on a piecemeal basis.

### What do you see as the Council's future role?

The Council has to be seen to be leading on certain key issues, such as REDD+ in the climate-change arena, illegality and good forest governance. If institutions and interest groups don't see that leadership from the Council, they will try to form their own bodies. Nevertheless, tropical timber is still the *raison d'être* for ITTO, whereas tropical timber is just a minor component in all the other forestry arenas. At the end of the day, timber is a renewable resource, so it would be a shame if we lose this opportunity to have a greater input and to help countries interested in managing their forests sustainably and equitably for their people. So the Council has a critical role

to play. It can bring a balance: consumers need timber, but natural forests cannot meet all the demand. Now a lot of countries are moving towards plantations, and these timber plantations—and other tree crops—are eating away at forest land, so we need a balance between consumption, development and conservation. The Council can assist its members in balancing development in a transparent way, and in taking a good-governance approach while meeting the needs of the people living in the forest.