

**The international forest research network, CTFS:
A member's perspective**

Shawn LUM
National Institute of Education,
NIE7-03-80, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616
shawn.lum@nie.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

The Center for Tropical Forest Science is a network of forest research plots that spans over 20 countries in temperate as well as tropical regions. The roots of CTFS can be traced to the establishment of a 50-ha forest dynamics plot on Barro Colorado Island, Panama, in 1980. After a second plot was set up in the Pasoh Forest Reserve in Malaysia in 1986, the network grew rapidly – it now includes 40 plots and monitors over 4 million trees comprising 8,500 species, and goes far beyond forest dynamics research to include many other scientific initiatives. The network is held together by the sharing of a standardized methodology for tree measurement and data collection. Each plot is managed by a local institution which in turn is a partner in the CTFS network. Network partners gather every few years to discuss future directions for the network, as well as to learn various data-related skills and analytical methods. Funding for forest censuses and research staff is comes through a complex combination of funding organizations – governments, foundations, local institutions, and the Smithsonian itself. With the expansion of CTFS activities, maintaining funding will be a major challenge for the network. The largest challenges for the network are perhaps people-oriented. How can succession from one generation of Principal Investigators to the next be facilitated, and how can opportunities be given to promising young scientists from developing countries to ensure the a smooth successional process? How can the network be expanded whilst retaining a closely-knit, collaborative community and how can goodwill and sharing of information and expertise be extended well into the future? The answer perhaps does not lie with the Smithsonian Institution alone, but rather with the help of the CTFS network partners and members of the larger CTFS community.

Keywords: Center for Tropical Forest Science • 50-ha forest dynamics plot • Smithsonian Institution • Tropical forest

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS AT THE WORKSHOP

Bourdeix: What are your relationships with C4?

Lum: The relationship is good, at least at a personal level. The director of C4 will know quite well and attend meetings with the director of the settings for tropical forest science. But at the institutional level, do the two institutes work together and share the data? It's not gone to that stage yet. So the relationship is cordial, but the potential for these large groups working together who have strength in the different parts of world have not yet been fully realized.

Kachi: I understand CTFS has exceptionally succeeded in developing a strong connection and network in a global scale in a scientific field but I wonder how such a strong scientific network could communicate with the outside of the science, between the local people or local government.

Lum: I think this happens at two levels. I'm not the director but if the director was standing here he might say that much of that interaction with the local community is really kind of up to the host institution. We leave it to the host institution. Again, the plot themselves are operated by a local country partner so in some cases like in Panama there is a lot of engaging of school children, local politicians, there's all that great community interaction. Other places, it's almost absent. And, I think one of the strengths of CTFS is that it's really focused on the science. It didn't really get itself involved in, was consciously decided not to get involved in advocacy work. That may be also potentially a weakness if you look at it from another direction. So, what about all the science? How do you ensure the findings and the importance of protecting these areas and getting local communities involved? If that message doesn't get out to policy makers then a large part of the potential of these research sites are being lost. There is no network wide policy. It's found in 20 countries of all different stage of development but as somebody from a teacher training institute I do think we should have educational spin-offs from this both formal school education as well as community education. We should maybe collaborate with other institutions whose focus is on the social aspects of forestry. But I think we should realize what we CAN do and what we would LIKE TO do and then to engage the appropriate partners to do those things we don't do but we think are important. So, yes I do think we could do a lot more.

Numata: Actually, how many Singaporean know about CTFS network?

Lum: Good question! With local parts of management authority, we have a very good relationship. But outside the field, even if you ask somebody who visits the nature reserve “Do you know CTFS?” they wouldn’t know. I’m embarrassed. They walk through it! Hundreds and thousands of people walk through it and there are little signs saying CTFS. Again, this idea of public awareness is a difficult one. I think in some countries awareness is just that much better and others there’s a little more apathy. So we’ve been trying to think of ways, especially starting with the year of forests which is this year. To actually try to get the public to help us measure trees in some parts of the reserve and at least to have a bigger presence. And not so much to teach them about who CTFS is but the importance of forests to individual lifestyle and consumer decision. So, Singapore has one of the most developed systems of education in all of south-east Asia, information on the web and everything and yet most people don’t know about CTFS. It just goes to show you the challenge that lies ahead or the fact that maybe I didn’t do a good enough job running the project...