



Forestry as a passport to international adventure



► The indomitable author trekking through rainforest.

BY JERRY VANCLAY

Few people would expect forestry training to act as a passport to international adventure, but the reality is that many foresters enjoy great adventures at home and abroad, as part of their work. Many careers involve travel, but an added attraction of forestry is that it usually involves field visits often to places with striking scenery.

It's not easy to offer an overview of the typical experience, because of the diverse pathways that foresters may take: some foresters spend years living in remote areas, while others 'fly in, fly out' as visiting consultants; some volunteer or take a modest local wage, while others thrive as development executives. What's common is that most of us love our work, and thrive on the experience.

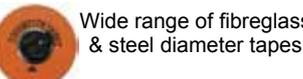
As a young forester, I hadn't thought about working overseas, but my employer asked me to assist with a forest inventory in Vanuatu. Part of the work was rather routine office work, but done from an exotic location in Port Vila. Field work was more arduous and exotic, and at one point involved camping on an

island beach, and making long boat trips and hiking in verdant forest to visit remote inventory plots. Such trips were not without drama: returning to camp one evening, the propeller struck an object in the water and disabled the engine, leaving us adrift in a small boat in the middle of Big Bay, without propulsion or communication (in the days before mobile phones). A few loose boards provided makeshift oars, and we reached our camp very late at night after a long row, a long beachwalk and a night-time wade across the River Jordan. But this didn't discourage me, and my experience led to other offers, so I soon enjoyed short-term engagements in PNG, Malaysia and (as it then was) Burma.

I spent three months in Burma, and loved every minute of it. Most of it was based in Rangoon, assisting local staff to build computer models to assist with sustainable forest management, but there were interesting trips to the field. One of the most interesting was to the Pegu Yoma where colonial foresters (notably Dietrich Brandis) established some important principles of forest management. One memorable moment was a visit to the District Forester's office, where the aide bearing a tray of tea 'limboed' into the room maintaining a smaller stature than his boss, then shuffled out backwards so as not to turn his back. In the forest, elephants were still used to harvest timber, and

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► *Ceiba pentandra* in varzea forest, with the flood level evident on the tree.



► One of the groups that contributed to the broomgrass work, with their new brooms.

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on hearing that my wife was expecting a child, one mahout plucked a coarse hair from an elephant's tail, and quickly knotted a ring, saying that it would ensure health and strength (it appears to work, for my family, if not for the Burmese forests).

Tropical forestry in Denmark

This experience led to my selection as professor of tropical forestry in Denmark, an appointment not as strange as it seems, as Denmark was at the time, Europe's largest trader in tropical timber. John Horneman had inherited a timber trading business from his grandfather, but could not foresee sufficient forest resources for his grandchildren, so sponsored research into sustainable forestry. Sadly, these investments were shortlived, as his board became more interested in the financial result than in the triple bottom line.

One of my projects concerned the Amazon varzea, the floodplain forest that floods deeply each year when the spring melts the snow in the Andes. This forest was under threat, because of the relative ease of harvesting and floating logs to market, and because of the expansion of rice cultivation on these lands. For a time, our research was conducted from Jenaro Herrera, a failed dairy project established with European assistance. Getting there was an adventure in itself, involving a flight to Iquitos (the head of navigation for ocean vessels, some 4,000km from the sea) and a hammock on a crowded riverboat for a day and a half upstream to the village. Reaching our field sites involved more small boats, long walks, and many wildlife encounters, including on one occasion, a very large and beautiful anaconda.

While I was with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), I was approached to assist with a conflict arising from illegal harvesting of poles from Zimbabwean forests. The Forestry Commission had approached the British Department for International Development seeking funds for more forest guards, and the desk officer realised that more guards were not sustainable and were not the solution. I helped to facilitate a reform process that engaged local communities in canvassing potential solutions, and together we found that the broomgrass on the vle (treeless areas dominated by sedges) could be more attractive and profitable than stealing

timber, and that careful husbandry could allow yields to be increased substantially.

In all my overseas work, I have learned at least as much as I have offered, but one lesson from the broomgrass was particularly instructive. One woman argued that more harvesters would make the harvest sustainable, a suggestion that appeared illogical to me, because it was clear that the resource was already overexploited. But I was wrong: when we tried the suggestion, it was clear that more harvesters meant closer adherence to the agreed code, which in turn contributed to a sustainable harvest. It's surprising how often the non-intuitive approach proves the best way to manage a resource.

To the Philippines

My longest involvement with a project has been in the Philippines, where we are working with smallholder plantations in the eastern island of Leyte. Serious deforestation during the 1970s was reversed with government initiatives during the 1990s, but these initiatives focused on free seedlings rather than on training, so that there are now many over-crowded and badly-managed small plantings that are unlikely to provide a return to their owners.

Our project has worked to help stakeholders understand the value chain, so that they make wise investment and silviculture decisions. Many landholders are reluctant to thin a planted tree, so our work has involved demonstration plots to emphasise the benefits of appropriate thinning. Attitudes to plantations have changed, with many tree planters now more interested in mixed plantings of native species and less interested in the *Gmelina arborea* monocultures of the past, and this is providing an interesting avenue for research.

Perhaps our most effective intervention arose from our observation that inadequate information hampered the efficient conduct of the market and exposed treegrowers to fraudulent middlemen – so we installed a series of whiteboards in village halls, urging log buyers and tree growers to indicate their desires on the board for all to see. These boards changed daily during the first few weeks, after which all players had a more realistic view of the potential demand and supply, and of the realistic price and preferred dimensions. The whiteboards are a neat example of the need for development workers to be able to think laterally and holistically, and to find simple solutions to complex problems.

Most recently, I've been back in Vanuatu, assisting with an ACIAR project to domesticate one of the native timber species, and to develop it as a commercial plantation species. So I've come full circle, back to where I first gained overseas development experience.

It is this first experience that is the key to working abroad: there is a catch 22 that overseas experience is usually a prerequisite for overseas work. A good way to gain your initial experience is as a volunteer, and both youth ambassadors (<http://www.ayad.com.au>) and Australian volunteers (<http://www.australianvolunteers.com>) offer good opportunities. Once you have a forestry qualification, and some experience, the world's your oyster.

Prof Jerry Vanclay is Dean of Science at Southern Cross University, the only university still offering a four year bachelor degree in forestry in Australia. He studied at Australian National University and University of Oxford, and worked with the Queensland Forest Service for several years before travelling the world with his forestry passport.



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