

## Alf Leslie: thinker and communicator

**A**lfred ("Alf") John Leslie, one of the great original thinkers and communicators of the forestry profession, died recently in his eighty-eighth year in Te Awamutu, New Zealand. The following has been written by Professor Ian Ferguson (Department of Forestry, University of Melbourne), with contributions illustrating other aspects of Alf's varied life from Jim Ball, Dave Harcharik, Paul Vantomme and Alastair Sarre.

Alf Leslie was born in Melbourne, Australia on the 5th of February 1921. He was educated at University High School, where he achieved an excellent academic record and was a long distance runner of note. He commenced training to be a Primary School teacher but changed his mind when offered a Forest Commission Cadetship at the Victorian School of Forestry, at Creswick, Victoria. He studied at the School from 1938 to 1940, graduating first in his class in 1941. He is remembered as a serious student and an ardent tennis player.

He supervised salvage logging on the Torongo Plateau for a time before joining the Royal Australian Navy. Alf was generally reluctant to talk about his war service. He was seconded to a Royal Navy submarine operating out of Western Australia during World War II and saw active service on it. He once vividly described the encounter between himself, as gunnery lieutenant, and an attacking Japanese plane, in which both achieved their goals, but leaving him with stomach and other wounds that dogged him in later life

After recuperation and the end of the war, he took up a field posting with the Forests Commission at Taggerty, where he met his wife-to-be, Jean. In 1947, he was nominated by the Commission to undertake the Bachelor of Science (Forestry) course at the University of Melbourne and graduated early in 1949. He and Jean were married on December 21, 1948, so planned as to minimize his time away from work. They later had two daughters, of whom he was very proud.

After their marriage he was posted to Mansfield and then to Beech Forest in the Otways in Victoria. He resigned to take up an appointment as Wood Superintendent and then Chief Forester with APM in Gippsland in 1951. APM was a relatively new paper mill, then largely reliant in hardwood pulpwood from nearby State Forests. He worked closely with the late Geoff Chandler, the General Manager of APM Forests Pty Ltd, in starting plantation forestry in Gippsland. On a visit there two years ago, he was greatly taken by the extent and success of the plantations, both pine and eucalypt, which at the time must have been a risky venture for a private enterprise.

His inclinations towards teaching resurfaced, and he took up appointment as Lecturer in Forest Management at the University of Melbourne in 1958 and was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1962. He completed a Master of Science in Forestry thesis and was Editor of the Australian Forestry

journal from 1962 to 1964. Forestry students of that era still extol his teaching in bringing economics and business management into a course that had been dominated by sylvan fundamentalism. He did so not as an ideologue, but as a sceptic, always able to point to the unresolved assumptions and logical gaps and to urge independent and critical thought and debate. He laboured long and hard in grappling with the problems associated with State-owned forestry, which predominated then. His experience in private enterprise highlighted some of the changes needed and he was not reticent in expounding on them in dialogue with students and colleagues.

He attended a forestry conference in 1963 in Malaysia, where he came to the attention of Jack Westoby, Director in the then Forestry Division of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations. Jack recruited him to a field project of FAO which was establishing a department of forestry at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, from 1964 to 1966. There, he gained a taste for the challenges of international forestry, notwithstanding the outbreak of civil war in Nigeria in 1966. During this and the earlier period of teaching, he read widely, especially in economics, and developed a standing internationally as a forest economist. He was by now a powerful speaker and although he did not then publish widely, what he did publish carried considerable weight.

In 1966, he was appointed Officer-in-Charge of Regional Stations in the then national Forest Research Institute in Canberra, Australia. During this time, he travelled widely and frequently between far-flung research stations and was highly successful in lifting the profile of forest research and of the researchers involved.

In 1968, he accepted an appointment as Forest Economist with FAO in Rome. During this period, and in later service with FAO, he encouraged and guided a number of Australian foresters into short-term consultancies in international forestry, establishing a core of people who later joined international organisations or undertook bilateral and multilateral research and consultancy projects. Teaching again called in 1974, when he took up the aptly-titled appointment as Reader in the School of Forestry at the University for Canterbury, New Zealand. A cohort of New Zealand forestry students of that era attest to his continuing influence through his teaching of forest economics and management.

In 1977, he was again recruited to FAO by Jack Westoby, to take up the position of Director of Forest Industries. He served with Westoby and a distinguished team of international colleagues working on many forestry projects in developing countries until he reached compulsory retirement age. He was later to assist a dying Jack Westoby in writing his final book, a testimony to the bond between them. He was one of the very few Australians to reach a very senior and influential level in international forestry

and many people in international forestry still refer to the motivation or insights that he gave in addresses and discussions during his frequent travels.

After his so-called 'retirement' in 1981, he extended his influence as an international consultant in tropical forestry. He was invited by Dr Freezailah, first Executive Director of the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO), to assist him in laying the groundwork for the work of the Organization when it commenced operation in 1986. He remained deeply engaged with ITTO and its work over the next 22 years, contributing to many of the Organization's key initiatives. His long experience in international forestry and dealing with international bureaucracies gave him the ability to 'cut through the crap', as one of his long time colleagues put it, in a way that was always illuminating and refreshing.

He was a bibliophile and, despite a very active professional career, read across a prodigiously wide range of topics. His recent book 'The Skeptical Forest Economist' (<http://repository.unimelb.edu.au/10187/2473>) encapsulates the curmudgeonly delight he took in disputing conventional wisdom, and deflating bureaucratic edicts and political correctness. To quote Alf: 'After playing around in the field of forest economics for the best part of sixty years, I wanted to sort out my ideas on the subject'. The book exemplifies his scholarship, prodigious memory, and love of reading. Booksellers, as well as us, will be much the worse for his passing.

He was a sceptic who delighted in starting an argument. His speeches often progressively developed the conventional wisdom on a topic, before 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 some rough but telling calculations on the back of an envelope. If the proponent could not immediately rebut his argument factually, they were well advised to think again.

At a personal level, Alf 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 the organisation or economy on an impersonal level. He could also point out the need to rethink ideas in a way that neither threatened nor embarrassed the proponent and encouraged many younger foresters to lift their aspirations, as many now in senior positions can attest. He was a gentleman in every respect; discourse always being lubricated with numerous cups of tea. Whatever the topic or concern, one left a discussion with him with a feeling that here was someone who listened, probed and cared, as well as counselled.

He was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Foresters of Australia in 1964 and is a past President of the International Union of Societies of Foresters. After 1981, he was a Visiting Fellow and Guest Lecturer at many universities, notably at

the University of Melbourne where he spent many years teaching and was a very popular supervisor of postgraduate students. The University of Melbourne conferred an honorary Doctor of Forest Science on him in 1994, in recognition of his services to international forestry. He was the recipient of the Council of Forest Engineering's 'International Forest Engineering Achievement Award' in 2007.

Vale Alf Leslie - a much respected and admired international forester, teacher, scholar, mentor, and sceptic.

**Jim Ball, Chair of the Commonwealth Forestry Association, writes:**

"I recall Alf from the time I joined FAO in 1974, especially his friendliness and accessibility whenever I came in to headquarters from the field. He was a bundle of energy - not only physical but especially mental. His writings made no concessions to the easy acceptance of the conventional view - indeed, one of his recent articles was entitled *The uncompromising future* (Unasyuva, 2001). It was written in his usual challenging but readable style; glancing through it I remembered the following which is typical of Alf: In effect... this combination of forces is telling us that much of what we now do, advocate, study and teach in forestry is hopelessly wrong. But Alf never described a negative situation without some ray of light: ...the picture is not all doom and gloom...it is actually a heaven-sent opportunity.

I continued to work with Alf after he had left FAO, notably when I was compiling a series of essays on sustainable forest management (*Readings in Sustainable Forest Management*, FAO Forestry Paper #122, 1994). He contributed an article on the Sustainable Management of Tropical Moist Forest for Wood, which remains relevant to this day.

He influenced so many of us in his life and his writings remain after he has gone; they will continue to make future generations of forest managers think about their work well into the years ahead.

Alf was awarded a regional medal by the Commonwealth Forestry Association in 2001, in recognition of his contributions to forestry not only in the Asia-Pacific region but worldwide."

Alf Leslie Alf was open and friendly to all, regardless of rank or position - a feature that was fairly unusual in the rigid hierarchy of FAO in the 1970s. The next two contributions illustrate his accessibility to all.

**Dave Harcharik (former Deputy Director-General of FAO) writes:**

"What I remember most about Alf was his pleasant greeting whenever we met, in the corridor, his office or mine,

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or years later at some conference. It was always a cheerful “Hi, Dive”, in his inimitable accent. Indeed, he was a wonderful, friendly person, and neither age nor differences in position deterred him from building relationships. We first met when I was a junior forester in FAO and he was a Division Director. Still, we talked often and freely, and I gained great respect for not only his persona but for his intellect. He was a wise and knowledgeable man, with great experience in all economic aspects of forestry and in many parts of the world. And he had an uncanny ability to communicate what he knew, especially through his prolific writings, many of which were classics which now form part of my own collection. He was also extremely dedicated. A forester’s forester. Working untiringly to the very end, he was immeasurably frustrated when his body finally let him down. The international forestry community will sorely miss Alf Leslie.”

## **Paul Vantomme (Senior Forest Officer, FAO) writes:**

“I first met Alf in 1978 when working in Mozambique as an associate expert in a large FAO-executed forestry development project. The country was ravaged by civil war and its forest industry shattered. Alf, the Director of the FAO Forest Industry Division at that time, made an extensive field visit to advise on how to re-build the forest industries, and I had the pleasure to accompany Alf on part of that field trip. Not only was Alf a wonderful and charming person to be with, he was also a source of great inspiration and “down-to-earth” rock-solid advice to timber company managers, wood processing technicians and forest managers as well as government and project staff alike. Since then, and whenever possible, I continued to seek Alf’s advice and enjoy his company.”

## **Alastair Sarre, formerly a colleague of Alf’s at ITTO, submitted the following on his contribution to ITTO:**

“Not long before he died I asked Alf what he thought was his greatest professional achievement. He simply said, “ITTO”. He was one of a handful of men who, in the 1970s and early 1980s, fought for the creation of the International Tropical Timber Organization, an institution that he believed was essential if the tropical forests were to be saved from destruction and if the tropical timber sector was to play its proper role in development. He was a close advisor to Dr Freezailah, ITTO’s first executive director, particularly in its very early days, and Freezailah’s successor, Manoel Sobral Filho. He wrote plenty on tropical forests and had strong views about the problems they face. Between them, he and Duncan Poore authored most of the 1990 ITTO Sarawak Mission report, which became a seminal work in the development of both ITTO and Sarawak’s forest sector. The coherence and style of that report are all the more remarkable given that (according to Duncan) the two of them could hardly agree on anything. Alf was brilliant, innovative and iconoclastic, unafraid of defending ideas that most would consider politically incorrect. He could demolish

the flawed arguments of others in a few sentences of direct, clear and logical prose. He was the master of the witty, if caustic, one-liner. He didn’t suffer from false modesty. Of a report he once wrote for ITTO, which was later added to, rearranged and edited, he said: ‘It’s not bad, at least the bit that I wrote!’ In 2005, at the age of 84, he said to me: ‘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.”

Alf will be greatly missed by the world forestry fraternity, but especially by his wife Jean, children Leigh and Eleanor and son in law Pat; and grandchildren Tristan and Alison, Morghan, Kiersten, Jesse-Leigh and Shannon.

A memorial service for Alf was held at Te Awamutu on what would have been his 88th birthday. In lieu of flowers, donations were invited for a memorial grove of trees at Creswick School of Forestry, Victoria, Australia, where Alf trained. These should be sent to:

Alf Leslie Memorial Fund, Westpac, PO Box 4, Te Awamutu, New Zealand, quoting a/c number 03-0442-0231527001, or see <http://itto.or.jp>