

CFA Newsletter

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CFA Newsletter

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The views expressed are not necessarily those of the CFA.

Preserving tree health: an opportunity to win friends, convince people and influence policy makers?



Students appreciating the value of tree health!

I know that I have one of the best "jobs" in the world, and that I am very lucky to be able to make this statement. Studying trees, their health, the fungi and insects that damage them very easily merges with holidays and other so called "time off" periods, often to the dismay of my husband and friends. Having said this, it is not only an interesting field of "study" but it is also important for the continued survival of trees and thus life on this planet.

During the course of the past decade alone, we have witnessed the appearance of numerous devastating tree pathogens and pests globally. Some of these threatened not only commercial

forestry operations but perhaps more importantly, woody plants in native ecosystems. The majority of these new pest and pathogen problems are as a direct result of the movement of infected plant material between regions and countries. As a pathologist/entomologist it is hard to imagine that anyone with a biology/botany/forestry background would even consider that moving entire plants, with soil/growth medium and all, is acceptable. Yet, this is still happening!

Diseases such as those caused by *Phytophthora ramorum* on rhododendrons, oaks and other trees, chestnut blight, Dutch elm disease, myrtle rust, *Ceratocystis canker* on plane trees, jarrah

die-back in Australia and more recently Ash decline in Europe, have resulted in some of the most eminent forest pathologists drawing up the "Montesclaros Declaration" (www.iufro.org/science/divisions/division-7/70000/publications/montesclaros-declaration). This declaration calls for the banning of all trade in "plants and plant products determined to be of high risk to forested ecosystems but low overall economic benefit".

Our great challenge must be to convince business people and policy makers that the Montesclaros Declaration and studies supporting the facts that it presents, is based on sound research, including economics. In the long run, it will cost less to be more careful about traded plant products than taking short cuts and moving entire plants around the globe.

Increasing numbers of people are becoming reliant on "modern" technologies as a safety net and an "excuse" to perpetuate their current activities. Here they believe that genetic manipulation, cloning and other technologies will provide fail-safe solutions to their tree/plant health and other problems. But, let me use two old clichés: "Change does not happen overnight" and "...there are no silver bullets" (the last being one of my mentor's favourite analogies) to illustrate some of my views here. Neither these new technologies, nor any other tree health management strategy will work effectively if not combined in an integrated system that includes the basics of forestry, breeding, quarantine, good planning, research and communication.

As a recent **CFA Queen's Award for Forestry** winner I have been asked to share some of the challenges of being a forest pathologist, as I perceive them. How to convince people that:

- The basics are important (eg. try cutting off your feet, or even just your toes, and then staying upright! The same goes for trees and root systems)
- There are no silver bullets! Keeping trees healthy is a long term commitment where prevention is far better than cure. In fact in the case of trees there are often no cures.
- One cannot resolve tree health problems rapidly neither with chemicals nor other approaches. Trees, fungi and insects are living organisms and 'engineering' type solutions don't apply.
- The movement of germplasm (plants, seeds, floral decorations) is dangerous – strict quarantine is crucially important!
- Integrated tree health management is the key. One form of management, eg. selection and breeding, will not be sustainable without the others, eg. Good silviculture, site and species matching etc.

Working in Africa has many challenges, but it also presents incredible opportunities both in forestry as well as in other disciplines. The challenges include those mentioned above, of convincing people not to take short cuts, but also of course there are also immense, funding issues and infrastructure challenges. One of my biggest wishes would be to have the ability to secure employment with reasonable remunerations, adequate research funding and reliable infrastructure for the many really great, willing and enthusiastic scientists and foresters that I regularly meet during my work in many parts on this great continent. I am convinced that if one could persuade international companies involved in forestry, local governments, research organizations and tertiary institutions in Africa to work together, tree health and other forestry research in the area would flourish. What we need is a long term vision, not just a 10 or 20 year vision, but a 100 year (and greater) vision to successfully tackle

tree health and related social issues on the African continent, and globally. We should consider our great-grandchildren, not just our children.



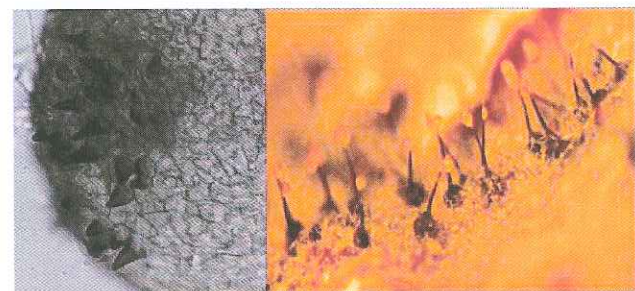
Extension work: From gardens of the "rich and famous" near Cape Town, torural farmers in, eg., Ghana and commercial plantations in South Africa.



Making new friends and learning about different cultures.



Sharing the first poster at an international congress and the joy of students on finding their first Armillaria infected tree on their own,



and appreciating the small and beautiful things in life.

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