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An Observation from the Eighth World Forestry Congress for Forest Products Education

The emphasis of the Eighth World Forestry Congress held in Jakarta October 16–28, 1978, was on managing tropical forests to improve the lives of those in developing countries. The 2,800 participants from over 100 nations discussed with concern the rapid disappearance of tropical forests, the fuelwood situation (which in many countries is the most difficult problem facing forestry), and the question of how to develop economically viable yet labor-intensive forest industries. There was general recognition, despite the concern over ecological and environmental uncertainties, that forest industries provide a major means of improving the economic condition of these nations and peoples.

The presence of foresters and forest products specialists trained at U.S. Forestry Colleges was very evident in the papers presented and in the discussions that followed. Those in SWST who have helped train many of these students should feel a real sense of satisfaction that many are rapidly assuming leadership roles and will help determine the future for tropical forests. Yet from the discussions, it was apparent that we could be of more help to future students from developing countries if we would modify somewhat the type of course/research programs we press upon them.

I would propose that all such students regardless of their specialty be exposed to two basic concepts. First is the process of economic decision-making, including the time-value of money. Call it business economics, industrial engineering, or whatever, the fact is that our foreign graduates often move rapidly into positions where economic, social, and managerial talents are required. To carry out this role they must be able to compare alternatives in economic terms. The decisions made in lesser developed countries may more often involve social and political costs and benefits than in the U.S., but adapting to that difference should not be a major problem. The second concept they need is that the economics-of-scale that we discuss in some of our forest products courses are not necessarily to be taken as gospel in all parts of the world. There is a need and an opportunity to apply "yankee" ingenuity. Many lesser developed countries need small plywood plants, paper mills, and composite panel plants that would not be considered economically sound in a developed country. Not only may there be a place for a small mill but for a much greater degree of labor-intensity than we normally consider efficient. I talked to one U.S. trained student in Jakarta who said he learned a great deal at the Congress, but the most important was that a paper mill didn't have to produce 1,000 tons per day.

I recognize that we cannot easily modify our graduate programs for these foreign students. Also, we will be asked to work with fewer of them in the future as the need for U.S. trained personnel has about been met in many developing countries. They will soon be training their own graduate students, as some already are. Nevertheless, for the few remaining years that these students will be coming to us we could give them more that will answer their needs.

JOHN G. HAYGREEN, *University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN*