

FAO – a knowledge organization for the third millennium

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Enhancing knowledge sharing is an ever-increasing focus of FAO's work – and Unasylva is a key contributor.



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Since 1945, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has served as a source of knowledge and information for its members to improve agriculture, forestry and fisheries practices and ensure food and livelihoods for all.

Enhancing FAO's role as a knowledge organization is one of the key objectives of ongoing FAO reform. In the years to come, developing innovative ways of sharing knowledge effectively and cost efficiently will be an increasingly important part of FAO's work.

The aim is to develop new mechanisms to transfer knowledge to resolve practical problems based on user expectations and needs. Taking advantage of rapidly evolving information and communication technologies, FAO is seeking to ensure in particular the dissemination and promotion of best practices. Progressively, FAO will enlist networks of key partners around the world to assist in knowledge-sharing activities and to provide guidance at the most appropriate geographic location.

Interactive information dissemination services such as "Ask FAO" (see Box p. 6) and thematic knowledge networks are bringing together specialists for the solution of specific problems and sharing of experiences across countries and regions. A special focus is put on capacity-building to assist countries, their decision-makers and technical specialists, and their institutions, to develop their own capabilities and to draw greater benefits from FAO's work.

These efforts are supported by an increased focus on strengthened interdisciplinarity, working together with UN partners, reinforcing alliances with civil society and deepening cooperation with members' organizations.

Unasylva contributes to all of these objectives. It spreads all over the world the knowledge of authors from all over the world: from national and local governments, UN agencies, field projects, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research and academia. It presents direct experiences from the field, providing information and knowledge to underpin technical and policy responses by member countries.

As an educational and capacity-building tool, *Unasylva* is prized by professors and teachers at many levels. For example, interviews with professionals at higher education and research institutes in the Philippines, undertaken as part of an auto-evaluation survey of forestry information carried out throughout Asia and the Pacific in 2004, indicated that "*Unasylva* is usually packed with good quality high-level articles, very widely read and a good source of useful teaching materials" and is valuable for literature review. "The articles are very much useful for updating knowledge for the benefit of our students and also implementing projects related to forestry

ASK FAO

In early 2006, FAO brought access to its knowledge and information to a new level by launching an interactive Web-based information service to provide direct access to both the formal and tacit knowledge of its staff and technical experts around the globe.

“Ask FAO” (www.fao.org/askfao), lets users pose questions directly to experts in the Organization and also includes a searchable “knowledge base” of answers to frequently asked questions covering issues as varied as how to ask FAO for technical assistance, how to control bird flu and what are national rates of deforestation.

Ask FAO is a user-driven service, answering questions related to the Organization’s areas of expertise. Involving a collaboration with FAO offices around the world as well as partner organizations, it provides a mechanism for communicating directly with technical experts in a particular field of interest. It is an important vehicle for dialogue and will also help improve FAO’s understanding of current topics of concern.

Ask FAO gives access to frequently asked questions and their answers. It serves as a knowledge portal, providing subject-based access to the wealth of information and data available on the FAO Web site.

Similarly, FAO’s “Best Practices” Web site (www.fao.org/bestpractices) serves as a one-stop source of technical information on recommended practices and techniques in food production, rural development, natural resource management and other areas.



and environment for the benefit of the community,” wrote one respondent to an online *Unasylva* readership survey undertaken in 2004. Readers reported using the journal in their work, studies and research, and to keep informed and up to date.

Unasylva reaches policy-makers, forestry professionals, project staff, extensionists, teachers, students and libraries. FAO recently met a request from the national office of the United States Peace Corps in Benin for copies of *Unasylva* in French and English. The magazine will be distributed to volunteers creating environmental clubs in educational institutions and working with NGOs in projects throughout the country.

Unasylva contributes to the professional development of foresters through the breadth of themes covered, answering questions before they are asked and enlarging its readers’ world. Before reading *Unasylva*’s recent issue on “Forests and human health”, for example, how many foresters or forest policy-makers had ever thought about the links between deforestation

and emerging infectious diseases? And yet these links provide a strong argument for responsible forest management. Other recent issues have briefed foresters on the links between forests and climate change and what the Kyoto Protocol means for forestry; and have demonstrated how specific countries benefit from their national forest programmes, providing practical examples that can be adapted by others.

As demonstrated by an Editorial from 1952 reprinted in this issue, entitled “Spreading knowledge”, FAO has not only always had a role in sharing knowledge; it also has a responsibility to help its audiences identify the most authoritative and worthwhile information available to them. FAO takes pride in being a reliable, neutral and comprehensive source of information. *Unasylva* is emblematic of this. FAO’s wealth of experience is brought to bear in the journal’s preparation and presentation. *Unasylva* articles are commissioned and peer reviewed by a board of forestry specialists to ensure sound scientific and technical information

and the highest level of quality. In the 2004 reader survey, 97 percent of readers professed to find *Unasylva* accurate and reliable.

Since the first Director-General of FAO introduced the first issue in 1947, means of disseminating information have greatly expanded – but interest in *Unasylva* has never flagged. The magazine is one means by which the Organization has reached out globally to enhance knowledge sharing for 60 years. Today, every issue of *Unasylva* ever published is available online free of charge. Yet reflecting the needs and priorities of countries, institutions and individuals, requests for hard-copy subscription continue to flow in unabated, especially from developing countries. Production was twice suspended for financial reasons, but both times FAO was convinced by popular demand to bring the magazine back. It is FAO’s longest running periodical – and the only truly global journal of its kind in forestry.