**Living with the trees of life: Towards the transformation of tropical agriculture**



By Roger Leakey
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As the global population has doubled and doubled again in less than a century, agriculture has managed to meet the hugely increased demand for food. But there has been a high cost: soils depleted of nutrients, erosion and compromised water supplies. As for those labouring in the fields, the great majority remain impoverished, malnourished and hungry. How to transform agriculture so that it is capable of even greater output but without even further environmental and human costs is the challenge answered by Roger Leakey in *Living with the Trees of Life.* With long and varied experience to draw on, he critiques the successes and shortcomings of modern agriculture before considering how changes in practice, incorporating trees in farming systems, could make good the lack of soil nutrients, while improved management of water would simultaneously halt erosion and better utilise available moisture, all to the benefit of producers and consumers.

Roger Leakey is unashamedly passionate in his view that agriculture must address the interests of the billions who continue to struggle in rural poverty, contributing to feeding others while they and the soils they crop remain starved of nutrients; increased global food production is dependent on rehabilitating soils and farmers. "How we practise agriculture is at the heart of the problem: land degradation leads to poverty, and that poverty leads to land degradation, creating a downward spiral," he writes. He calls for a change from what he terms the 'colonial ethic', "which was to discourage the use of traditional foods from the forest, and to replace them with foreign food crops for cultivation on land cleared of woody vegetation." This modern agriculture in the tropics has been at a great price.

Trees are key, all species offering shade and shelter to soil and crops from excessive sun and rain and their roots stabilising the soil. Meanwhile leguminous species bring nitrogen to depleted soils and trees yielding fruit, nuts, medicines and useful non-food products such as barks and resins provide consumable and saleable produce. Such a multifunctional agriculture is low input but potentially much higher output than many widely practised cropping systems. "Thus there are some well-defined approaches to developing more socially relevant, pro-poor, smallholder agriculture that: (i) rehabilitate natural capital; (ii) foster ecosystem services; (iii) increase production; and (iv) enhance livelihoods," writes the author. He presents his case lucidly and with humour, backs his claims convincingly with the results of trials and practice, as well as supporting comment from other scientists, extension staff and farmers. To quote just one of them, Dr Goetz Schroth of the Federal University of Western Para, Brazil, "This account is inspiring and thought-provoking both for the student and the seasoned practitioner of sustainable land use and agricultural development. It is also an excellent introduction for the interested lay person."

*Living with the Trees of Life* is persuasively argued and reflects a personal journey of discovery that the reader is pleased to share.

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