BOOK REVIEW

**Living with the Trees of Life: Towards the Transformation of Tropical Agriculture**

**Author: Roger Leakey**

**Published by CABI www.cabi.org**

"To me the Garden of Eden conjures up images of lush vegetation in a land with plenty of natural resources where people live in equilibrium with their environment, eating alluring and little-known fruits and nuts - the 'Trees of Life'." This is the opening line of Roger Leakey's book on his many years of experience looking at agroforestry and sustainable farming in different parts of the world. It sets the tone for an absorbing and eye-opening series of chapters that seek to share his experiences from many different parts of the world over a fruitful and productive career in agroforestry.

While many might first dismiss the subject of agro-forestry and agriculture as 'boring' or relegated to dry technical manuals gathering dust on shelves of NGOs, this book is a refreshing and optimistic look at some of the most pressing issues facing the planet and human survival and continued economic development.

Without a doubt, the issue of food production remains one of the most pressing and debated social and development topics today. Solutions range from calls for the increase of high-tech and high-input, intensive large-scale farming, basically a second 'Green Revolution, to arguments for investments in sustainability: looking at the health of soils, farming systems, watersheds as well as the farmers and communities they feed. This book is a voice for the latter: working with nature to increase productivity without wreaking havoc on the land.

Why does this matter for wildlife? Well, basically agriculture is a serious environmental issue: from the direct physical competition for space, human-wildlife conflicts between farmers/ herders and wild animals to the massive impacts of farming on soils, water and climate. There is no doubt that any project centred on conservation today needs to take into account the fact that food production remains one of the most central and challenging (in terms of sustainability) of human endeavours.

While the issue of a growing world population seems almost an insurmountable topic on the global stage, Roger Leakey's book shines a small beam of hope about practical means and ways to sustainable food security and more importantly nutritional security: where communities are able to source a balanced diet, including sufficient amounts of essential trace elements, micro-nutrients and vitamins, from the crops that they produce themselves.

Roger Leakey's book is highly readable and written in an accessible and lively style. The chapters loosely follow some of the author's travels across the world, primarily in the tropics, as he travels for work and projects. Discussing both the successes and challenges of using trees as crops and incorporating them into various farming systems, the examples drawn directly from the field and written with much humanity

and insight make for thought-provoking reading. For those who have spent any time in rural farming communities in tropical countries, it will come as no surprise how important trees and tree-products are in these rural diets and subsistence economies. However, what is striking about this book is just how many tree species are out there that are useful, and also how little yet we have truly managed and exploited them.

By incorporating agroforestry trees into their farms, small-scale farmers can increase yields, protect and improve soils and supplement both household income and nutrition. One graphic example from this book shows the incredible effect of having a fallow area with the nitrogen-fixing *Sesbania* (which is familiar to many residents of East Africa), where the subsequent maize crop is twice as tall and higher yielding than the adjacent experimental crop without the added benefit of the nitrogen-fixer.

This is just one of numerous examples that Roger Leakey's book discusses, many of them related to projects developed by the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) whoseheadquarters are in Nairobi. It is these ***many*** examples of sustainability, healing and intensifying production by working with nature that make this book an enjoyable read.

The success stories from many hidden corners of the world are inspiring and will no doubt encourage many to seek out these solutions for their own communities or those they might work with through conservation projects. By capturing, the words, questions and joy of farmers and others who directly work with and benefit from nature, Roger Leakey clearly shows how important the human dimension of sustainable development remains.

As Julian Cribb, author of 'The Coming Famine: the Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do To Avoid It', points out: "World agricultural science has for two generations been dominated by a high-energy model of farming... Science has largely neglected the equally promising but far less understood low-input systems." It is these low-input' systems that are the backbone of many rural communities, and rather than bulldozing them down as has been the norm in many areas that modernise, this book shows another way of intensification, one with many reasons to be optimistic.

**Reviewed by: Dino Martins**

SWARA JANUARY - MARCH 2013 (East African Wildlife Society)