

International Poplar Commission holds its 24th Session in Dehradun, India

At the end of October 2012, 197 participants from 22 countries gathered in Dehradun, India, to attend the 24th Session of the International Poplar Commission (IPC). The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and the Forest Research Institute (FRI) had embraced to host this high-profile event that brought together international stakeholders, forest scientists, researchers, tree growers, processors and traders to address topical issues related to the theme *“Improving Lives with Poplars and Willows”*.

Formal IPC Sessions are held every four years in different regions of the world to demonstrate unique applications of poplar and willow culture and management in different country contexts. In 2012 the session was organized for the first time in India at the magnificent Forest Research Institute in Dehradun, which is rich in forest history and has served as a centre of excellence for forestry research and education for more than 100 years.



The Forest Research Institute in Dehradun was built in 1906



Lighting of the lamp by Mr. Eduardo Mansur, FAO, during the opening ceremony of the 24th IPC-Session

In recent years India has undergone a remarkable economic transformation and has become a significant international player in sustainable natural resource management with the capacity and capability to share the knowledge and technology through established networks around the world. In this context the IPC-Session provided an excellent opportunity for India to demonstrate its rich application of poplars with agriculture that highlight the achievements and the potential of planted forests and their end uses. This event certainly marked a significant milestone in the history of the International Poplar Commission.

The International Poplar Commission

The IPC was founded in 1947 by 9 European countries in the aftermath of the destructions of the Second World War with a view to supporting the reconstruction of rural and industrial economies in Europe by mutual support, by sharing knowledge, materials, and people. The founding year of the IPC is, by coincidence, the same year when India became independent and one of the largest democracies in the world.

The IPC is now 65 years old, and is the only legally binding agreement on forests hosted by FAO. It has become a statutory body of FAO in 1959 and has since increased its membership to the current number of 37 countries from temperate and arid regions, in many of which poplars and willows have become significant forest resources that support communities, smallholders, farmers and contribute to sustainable livelihoods, food security and poverty alleviation.

The IPC is not a scientific institution or an academic society; its goal is to spread science, to share knowledge, to stimulate the organization of conventions and study tours, to create links that make the

results obtained anywhere accessible and useful to the broader community of extension services, industry, policy makers, farmers, so that rural communities worldwide can take the future into their hands and use poplars and willows as a stairway to prosperity and sustainable development. Thus, IPC provides a forum for an open debate between science, industry, policy makers, and the civil society. A debate focused on facts and not on ideologies, with the goal of devising solutions. The IPC was essential in spreading and sharing the scientific and technical knowledge obtained by its early members to the benefit of many other countries, especially in the Middle East, Eastern Asia and South America. The most striking example of the effect of the international exchange of knowledge and experience is represented by China, that has expanded poplar plantations and poplar use in agroforestry systems to become the real giant of today's poplar culture in the world.

Significance of poplars and willows

Perhaps more than any other family of woody plants, excluding fruit trees, the Salicaceae with the genera *Populus* (ca. 100 species) and *Salix* (ca. 450 species) have been “domesticated” and brought into continuing, purposeful interaction with human cultures. The Latin word “populus” (people, or populace) and the name of the tree genus “*Populus*” (poplar) may reveal the popular identity of the poplar tree. Poplars and willows have been used and modified by man for thousands of years while the close association of poplars and willows with people is well expressed in China, where “Yang” (杨, poplar tree) and “Liu” (柳, willow tree) are common surnames.

Poplars and willows account for more than 95 million ha of natural (82 million ha) and planted forests and agroforestry production systems (13 million ha) globally. They are among the fastest-growing trees on the planet in temperate regions and have become a significant forest resource that supports communities, smallholders, farmers and companies towards socioeconomic development and sustainable livelihoods in many parts of the world, particularly in rural areas. India is in fact a magnificent example on how the cultivation of poplar trees can contribute to sustainable livelihoods, food security and poverty alleviation.



Poplar plantations create jobs for women in rural areas

Since long, poplars have been favoured by Indian farmers for their fast growth, easy propagation, adaptation to poor soils, easy cultivation and for the broad range of possible uses. In India, poplars are the most popular tree species in agroforestry production systems, where they are intercropped with agricultural crops like wheat, sugar cane, paddy rice and shade-tolerant fodder crops due to their fast growth, outstanding properties and quick and high financial returns. These mixed, intercropping production systems, where different crops are grown on the same piece of land, developed by farmers in response to their own needs, have demonstrated, that they are more effective in meeting the expectations of rural communities than specialized monocultures.

Poplars and willows provide a wide range of environmental services (such as shelter, shade and protection of soil, water, crops, livestock and dwellings) and play an important role in phyto-remediation of severely degraded sites, in the rehabilitation of fragile ecosystems (including combating desertification), in forest landscape restoration, often integrated with agriculture, horticulture, viticulture and apiculture, and, as fast growing species, are effective at sequestering carbon. They create employment, boost exports and contribute to social and economic development and sustainable livelihoods in rural areas.

IPC needs reform

However impressive the achievements may be, IPC is also aware of critical aspects that deserve serious consideration, some of which may relate to the complexities inherent to all International Organizations. Despite the persisting interest in poplars and willows, and new uses in the fields of environmental preservation and bioenergy, membership has not increased for some years now, and developing countries are a minority as members of the IPC; the National Poplar Commissions of quite a number of member countries, with notable exceptions, are facing internal difficulties and are not very active. The relatively narrow geographic and technical focus of the IPC makes it difficult, in present days, to clearly recognize the link with the FAO mandate, and therefore, to attract multi-lateral and bilateral donor and international program interest and funding, although vast areas of Central Asia, India, North Africa would greatly benefit from an improvement of poplar and willow culture.

Following a recommendation by the Committee on Forestry of the FAO, in September 2012, the IPC Executive Committee has opened a frank and positive discussion in order to maintain its relevance in a world that is very different from that of 65 years ago. It has commissioned a Task Force to develop and implement future options of reform. These options will have to consider a broader geographic area, a wider socio-economic and technical context, an even stronger attention to the worldwide concern about climate changes, soil preservation, and the efficient use of water resources. This may also mean expanding the scope to include other species of high socio-economic or ecological significance.

The IPC is aware that business-as-usual is not an option and that a new strategy for the future must be devised. With a renewed appreciation of its full potential and a consequent support by the international community, the IPC can contribute to sustainable development and sustainable land-use thanks to its unique experience in addressing the livelihoods and the well being of rural communities as its primary objective.