

FROM THE INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Sarita Lama of Nepal was one of our 2015 International Fellows who came here to learn about community involvement in forestry, a field in which she had many years of experience in the remote outer hills of Nepal. I was reminded of Sarita earlier this month during a discussion about diversity and equity at a World Forestry Center-sponsored conference on community forestry organized by Oregon Community Trees and the Oregon Department of Forestry.

At a 2015 talk about her work with women, Sarita told us how impressed she was by the high level of environmental awareness in the Pacific Northwest. When someone in the audience commented that surely people in Nepal—famous for its natural resources—must appreciate nature more than we do, she replied “Not really. We’re surrounded by so much nature. What most people need are electricity, running water, roads, and jobs.”

Sarita’s reply rang true to me. Growing up in a developing country myself in the early independence years of Singapore, progress then was measured in terms of housing, employment, and access to modern conveniences, not by the availability of greenspace. It would only be much later that we became more aware of the importance and benefits of providing urban forests in densely populated cities. I suppose it’s human nature to value more of what you have less of.

The lesson here is that sustained environmental equity cannot be divorced from economic equity. This is as true in Oregon as it is in Nepal. The homeless man sleeping in your neighborhood park sees that bit of urban forest as a place of shelter more than as a place of worship or recreation. Likewise, the displaced worker in rural Oregon, in cities where schools, libraries, and police services are being lost to the declining economic fortunes of once timber-dependent communities.

Singapore achieved first-world status in only a single generation, lifting millions out of poverty. Today it is regarded as one of the greenest and most environmentally sustainable cities in the world. It is a good reminder that when we talk about environmental inequity in forests around the world, we must also address economic inequity, because making progress on the latter can be a powerful tool in achieving progress on the former.

We’re grateful to the Saritas of the world, and groups like our partners Oregon Community Trees and the Oregon Department of Forestry, for their continued efforts to improve equity and diversity in our forests. I hope you will join us for a discussion of how our International Fellows are advancing forestry around the world at our [When Small is Big: Forest Initiatives Around the Globe](#) event on July 19.

Sara Wu
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