

MAKING DREAM OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT A REALITY

By Melea Reicks Licht

Don Koo Lee breathed deeply and looked out into the audience of delegates to the United Nations. He leaned into the microphone and began to speak:

“The core idea is that sustainable development is feasible when both developing and developed countries assume full responsibility, share each other’s burden and collaborate,” Lee said as part of his address. “I believe these are the values we must continue to uphold and pursue.”

As minister of the Korea Forest Service, Lee (’75 MS forest biometry, ’78 PhD silviculture) sought to inspire the delegates to work together in “ecosystemic development,” which he and other world leaders see as a possible solution for desertification, land degradation and drought.

Lee was invited to address the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in October 2011 as president of the Conference of the Parties, the decision-making body of that convention. He proposed the Changwon Initiative, which provides practical measures to battling desertification and land degradation.

Lee is a renowned expert in forest sciences, especially forest regeneration and silviculture (the growth and management of trees for wood production). He served as president of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations from 2006 to 2010 and became minister of the Korea Forest Service in February 2011.

“I make and develop better policies and determine how to put them into practice. I

enjoy knowing that the Korea Forest Service is well-recognized among other government organizations in our country. We recently obtained the top ranking in one-year work accomplishments among 38 government organizations.”

Most of Lee’s career has been spent as a professor of forest sciences at his alma mater—the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Seoul National University—where he also served a two-year term as dean.

His academic career culminated in the publication of “Ecological Management of Forests,” a book he authored with 29 of his students.

For Lee, the completion of his master’s and doctorate at Iowa State not only allowed him to build a meaningful career, it was the achievement of a childhood dream to become a professor.

Lee says he is glad government consultants recommended he attend Iowa State. He remembers the kindness and friendliness of Iowans, the hot July day he married his wife in a church near Ames, the volatile summer weather and the football rivalries.

“The Cyclones beat Nebraska in 1976 and the goal post was destroyed in the joy of victory,” he recalls.

Lee’s advice to current students: “Please have your own dream! Be ambitious in spirit and honest in all your works! Then you will be well-recognized and obtain great success.”

His dream for the Republic of Korea is to continue to lead and collaborate with the international community in sustainable development and forestry cooperation. ■



Photo: R.H. Lee, Korea Forest Service

In his work with the United Nations Don Lee, minister of the Korea Forest Service, is working to address desertification and land degradation worldwide. He says to succeed all nations must “assume full responsibility, share each other’s burden.”

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Relive the Cyclones 1976 victory over Nebraska via video online.