

The Legacy of the Vetiver Network International A Tribute to its Founding Fathers

A tribute is offered to those founding fathers that had a vision of what could happen when a simple, sustainable and affordable technology is introduced to many who are considered the poorest of the poor around the world.

The Vetiver System comes from centuries of use in India and has been transformed in the last 60 years by modern agronomists, agricultural researchers, foresters, extension workers, development specialists, businessmen and women and others. However, a few individuals stand out and it for these people that I, the outgoing President of the Vetiver Network International wish to salute and say thank you in the name of all of us, members of TVNI.

At the heart of the worldwide network are John Greenfield and Richard Grimshaw, one an agronomist from New Zealand and the other a British agricultural specialist and World Bank administrator, who transformed the notion that "When a man hands over his farm to his son, he should always aim to turn it over in a condition that is at least as good as when he inherited it from his father".

Together they took a simple multi-faceted technology based around the use of *Chrysopogon zizanioides*, vetiver grass, from erosion control and terrace formation for sugar cane plantations on Fiji to the Caribbean into mainstream development activities in SE Asia, Latin America, South America, Sub-Sahara Africa, Indonesia and the Philippines, China, the countries of Southern Europe and North Africa to name a few of the tropical and subtropical areas around the world.

They were not alone as they persuaded others of the system's merits and thus our cause was born and nurtured. Mark Dafforn and Noel Vietmeyer of the US National Academy of Sciences were early converts creating one of the first widely publicized documents we all know as the Blue Book, "Vetiver Grass, The Hedge Against Erosion." P.K. Yoon was responsible for significant early research on propagation and hedge establishment in Malaysia in the early 1990s. People always question that if the vetiver system is such a good idea, why haven't we known about it forever? To which John Greenfield has always replied that we looked but did not see and to which PK Yoon responded with his classic "Look-See at Vetiver".

A bigger than life supporter appeared when His Majesty the King of Thailand embraced this technology and put his considerable resources and talents behind the movement insuring the continued support from his Royal Development Project Board to this day.

Jim Smyle and his wife Joan introduced comprehensive vetiver systems to Latin America especially Costa Rica and with the onslaught of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, vetiver-protected roads survived rains that dropped up to 1900 mm.

One cannot talk about vetiver without the personality of Paul Truong surfacing. A tireless soil scientist and natural resources public administrator and prolific researcher, Paul has used his considerable talents to encourage young professionals to get involved and implemented countless research efforts. His work in Vietnam is a testament to his vision and commitment that continues to this day and you will hear and see much from him during the conference.

The Chinese Vetiver Network under the guidance of Dr. Liyu Xu has demonstrated how research combined with private sector involvement can spread ideas and motivate people to do what in the past was not possible. Other names come to mind as well, Duncan Hay and Roley Noffke in South Africa, Criss Juliard who began a movement in Madagascar and took it to Senegal, Mali and Morocco. Ditti Hengchaovanich from Thailand who pioneered road stabilization in so many countries to whom we owe so much.

His compatriot, Narong Chomchalow put together and maintains the Pacific Rim Vetiver Network after so many years and who will be recognized later on in this conference as having a significant worldwide influence. One also cannot forget Paul Zuckerman and Monty Yudelman, whose faith in Dick and John allowed our network to take form and blossom with their contributions on the Board of Directors.

However the list goes on, but comes back on itself and we are here to salute John Greenfield and Richard Grimshaw OBE. For me the light is clearly shining from them today as it has for so many years. They have profoundly changed my life and I wish to say thank you for all of us.

One of the seminal documents written was John Greenfields book entitled, 'Vetiver Grass, An Essential Grass for the Conservation of Planet Earth'. Perhaps the quotation he uses from Ralph Waldo Emerson is worth repeating here, "Society is always taken by surprise at any new example of common sense." I have poured over this book many times and from it came the second manual after the blue one, simply called the "Green book". It is the handbook we put in our pockets when we go to the field. The ink pen drawings of photos in his larger book are simple and substitute for the thousands of words it takes to describe a situation. The little green book has been distributed to tens of thousands of people across the world and still remains an essential part of our extension work.

Dick was able to send these out to all of us taking advantage of the gracious support from the Thai Royal Development Project Board. Lets not forget the series of booklets that the Pacific Rim Vetiver Network produced that also has influenced so many of us.

Now back to my story.

John, now in his 80s never ceases to amaze me with his stories and the background of how from his experiences in Fiji, his discovery of the impact of

vetiver hedgerows on soil conservation and water infiltration and erosion control remained unutilized as he went into the FAO and was assigned to agricultural projects in many countries. His 12 years in Africa were frustrating and little appreciation was given to solutions he presented. Instead, these solutions were ignored and not used.

We can now jump forward a bit to when Dick and John joined forces. In the World Bank, Dick Grimshaw was running the India Agricultural Division out of New Delhi. Since India is the “Home” of vetiver, John felt that if he could join Dick in India, he could get back to pushing VS as an essential system of soil and moisture conservation. He joined Dick in the India Division in 1985.

The rest as they say, is history. Initially Dick, like everyone else, was a little sceptical of vetiver’s prowess at first, but once they had some vetiver hedges doing well on their World Bank-funded projects, Dick became a great supporter.

However today I really want to speak a little bit more about the man who can be singled out as bringing us together. Dick is much more than a founding father. He inspires all of us because he is persistent, he is persuasive, he is diligent and he has an infallible memory sending us countless pictures and stories and contacts to all of us when we need them. Indeed today he is the “Blogger”. He glues us together and we are stronger for it.

I met Dick in Madagascar in 1996 when Criss Juliard and I invited him there to introduce the use of vetiver technology when applied to rural roads on a project the two of us were working on. Today we see the impact of that fateful day with yet another award to vetiver use in Madagascar by Yoann Coppin. Little did I know at the time how that event would change me and lead me down a path that I never knew existed. While he was in Madagascar, he transferred his entire vetiver computerized library to me one night at our hotel in Northern Madagascar. His generosity is unsurpassed and the time he has spent sharing with all of us over the past 25 years can never be underestimated.

All of us have stories about how we have been touched by John and Dick. If only they were here in person. My time has run out for this set of opening remarks and I do hope that the remaining three days will bring insight and create a stronger bond between all of us.

I leave you with a small story they told me about his time and John’s time in Ghana where I currently work. They were there however in the 1960s. This story is very typical of both of them and so I wish to share it with you and it has nothing to do with vetiver, but more to do with the spirit of the men. It is all about grass cutters, the common word for big bush rats in Ghana. I quote:

“Grass cutters!” typifies Ghana. They were a great source of income for hunters with bows and arrows and they didn’t get too many as you can imagine. Well when we harvested our first major crop of maize, I had trained the operators to drive our John Deere Maize Combines, which we had imported at great cost. As you can imagine, the grass cutters thought that maize was a gift from the Gods. And if you have done any crop harvesting yourselves, you’ll know how you drive all the ‘game’ into the last few rows in

the centre of the crop. Well on this first occasion, all the villagers gathered in the maize field armed with clubs and spears, I was in another field, when I noticed our harvesters heading off in all directions - unmanned, when the grass cutters burst from the remaining rows everybody was in full chase including my drivers, who just jumped off the harvesters without stopping them. It's the first time and last time I have had to wrangle combine harvesters to a halt from a jeep."

This final anecdote is simply an illustration of the nature of these men and their breadth and depth of their experience as well as their impact on each and every one of us. Thank you and have a great three-day program.

Dale Rachmeler, Ph.D.
Board of Directors, TVNI
Former President 2003-2011