

December 8, 2005

UWSP graduate receives international recognition for pioneering work on Bolivian tropical forests

A University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP) graduate with a degree in forestry and biology has recently been awarded the Bolivian Sustainable Forestry Award.

Land of Lakes resident Robert Simeone, a 1977 alumnus, was recently presented the award by Bolivian President Eduardo Rodriguez Veltze at a two-day forestry conference in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Simeone is president of Sylvania Forestry, LLC, a northern Wisconsin firm located in Land of Lakes, and his recognition is a culmination of his work in South American tropical forests begun in 1979. Joining the president of Bolivia to present the award to Simeone were representatives from international conservation organizations including the World Wildlife Fund and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Throughout Simeone's career he has taken a conservation/market approach to his forestry work. "Sustainable forest management is the first key to closing the gap between tropical forest conservation and income for indigenous communities," said Simeone. "The second key is to successfully market the unique wood products that come out of each community's forests."

According to Simeone, these forests were once rich with teak and mahogany and remain the home of many rare and endangered species including harpy eagles, jaguars and howler monkeys. Tragically, many teak and mahogany forests no longer exist in Brazil and hence much of his forestry work targets other more plentiful, high-quality tropical woods.

Deforestation and its accompanying environmental degradation remain one of the greatest challenges facing tropical countries. Simeone has dedicated his career to tropical forest conservation since his Peace Corps days in Paraguay and Ecuador. Following his Peace Corps experience, he and his wife, Terry, helped indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon establish forestry cooperatives that championed economically viable sustainable forest management alternatives to the ongoing practice of clear-cutting local forests and turning them into agricultural lands. His mentor at UWSP, Hans Schabel, was influential in Simeone's decision to pursue both the Peace Corps and sustainable forestry management initiatives in Latin America.

"Schabel and other forestry faculty at UWSP helped me make some key early career decisions that in retrospect built a bridge to my ongoing forestry work in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America," said Simeone, who began his work in promoting sustainable forest management in Bolivia in 1990. Today Bolivia is recognized as the leader in sustainable forest management in the

tropical world with its achievement of more than five million acres of sustainable forests independently certified by the FSC.

Today Simeone often works as a consultant with timber producers in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America. He has teamed up these past years with the Bolivian Roda Furniture Industry and the Italian firm, Ciani Design, in a successful bid to market FSC certified forestry products in the United States, United Kingdom and the European Union.

“Whether in northern Wisconsin or the jungles of Bolivia, my mission is to demonstrate a comprehensive approach to forest management that factors in environmental and social, as well as economic sustainability,” said Simeone.

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