

FACE TO FACE

Certified Success



Ruth Nussbaum: "my hope is that, in time, all forests will be well managed"

Defra's Central Point of Expertise on Timber (CPET) is run by ProForest, a private company co-founded by Dr Ruth Nussbaum. Keith Fryer follows her career path

Ruth Nussbaum was born in Stoke-on-Trent and grew up on campus at Keele University, where her father was a lecturer. But, while she's still a staunch Stoke City fan, she's somewhat broadened her horizons beyond the 'Potteries'.

"My gap year took me sheep shearing in New Zealand, followed by trekking around Nepal and Thailand," she said. "After completing my [chemistry] degree at Reading, I stayed with a Nepalese graduate in Nepal, studying natural resources."

However, a job with Dow Corning brought things back to reality. "I worked in Barry, South Wales as a quality assurance engineer and was the second woman on site; at 22 years old it was daunting, but by matching my *Playgirl* pin-ups for theirs from *Playboy*, they soon got the message! I went to the States a couple of times but gradually concluded that it was not my scene – I left to do a Masters in Soil Fertility and Conservation."

This set the course of Ruth's life in two ways. "I gate-crashed a gorgeous Brazilian surfer's party and gained the perfect icon!" she said. Pedro Moura-Costa, now managing director of environmental finance specialist EcoSecurities, and Ruth Nussbaum have been together ever since.

A job interview at Exeter University set off another train of events. "I thought the job was for one year in Exeter and it ended up being based in Malaysia, studying the impact of logging on rainforests," said Ruth. "They needed plant breeding expertise and I knew the right person for the job – Pedro came over and we ended up there for five years while I completed my PhD in forestry rehabilitation, surrounded by elephants, clouded leopards and orang-utans."

While she was in Malaysia, the Forest Stewardship Council was gaining momentum and, as she found forest certification standards interesting, she went on to join one of the largest certification bodies, SGS in Oxford.

By 1996, at 32 years old, Ruth was running SGS's Qualifor system, a global certification programme, which she continued until 2000, by which time it operated from 20 offices. "Pedro was running EcoSecurities by then and so we tended to meet in airport lounges. But it was fascinating, generally out in the wilds – a very high pressure job set in the midst of wonderful countryside."

By 2000 Ruth had found that there were very few people helping businesses prepare for certification. "I felt we could fill the gap between both ends, from forests to conferences, so Neil Judd and I set up ProForest."

ProForest is established on ethical grounds. "We need to be profitable, but it's not the only motivation," said Ruth. "We have a balance of income from governmental,

private and NGO clients, including John Lewis, Tetra-Pak, the Danish government, the World Bank and the WWF."

Gaining the contract to operate the Central Point of Expertise (CPET) on Timber for the government was undoubtedly a major coup and Ruth explained the essence of their success. "It was our experience in the private sector and that we have 13 people working specifically on responsible production and trade in natural resources. No other bidder had that resource, even though ProForest was the smallest company to tender."

Managing CPET, she added, requires a range of skills. "It has to run in a complicated world. Starting in September 2005 we assessed the certification schemes and passed the information to Defra who made the final decision, with advice from the CPET reference board."

She acknowledged that there's still scope for improvement in the field of certification. "The UK is undoubtedly setting a worldwide agenda, because we're seriously trying to implement the tasks that we're set, but there's still plenty to do. There has been good progress and, in some sectors like paper and furniture, it is now relatively straightforward to source certified products. But in others, like construction, it is more complex and there's some way to go. Pilot projects on site are very important as they will help to train people. CPET only plays a small part; the main work has to be done by everyone from purchasing and sales to site gate staff. We're running monthly training courses, which hundreds of people have attended."

The London 2012 Olympics building projects, she maintained, could give the industry greater impetus to boost its capacity to deliver timber that is proven legal and sustainable.

Category B (proof of legality/sustainability on uncertified material) is another area that's "under development". "Some of it's easy; home-grown fence posts for instance," Ruth explained, "but some is extremely complicated. We need Category B to include acceptable, uncertified material and many things are perfectly acceptable; we must not only allow certified timber. My hope is that, in time, all forests will be well managed. In the meantime we need mechanisms that exclude badly managed forests."

Meanwhile the pressures of running ProForest have to be balanced against life outside work. "We have two young daughters to think of and I'm trying to travel a lot less and be at home far more often," said Ruth. "We also spend one month a year in Brazil, so the children see all of their family, but with the benefit of modern IT we can operate from there." ■