

Ernst Walter Mutert, 1940-2007: Memoriam

Dr. Ernst Mutert's many friends and colleagues in Southeast Asia, Germany, the USA, and around the world were saddened to hear of his death on October 27th after a long illness. Dr. Mutert was Director of the East and Southeast Asia Program of the Potash & Phosphate Institute (PPI) and International Potash Institute (IPI) in Singapore from 1994 to 2002.

He was born in Osnabrück in 1940 and, after gaining practical experience on his family farm and farms in northern Germany, took his first degree at the College for Agricultural Science and Technology in Osnabrück and a Diploma in Plant Production at the Christian-Albrecht University in Kiel, where he also completed his doctorate in soil survey in 1980.

Dr. Mutert's first appointment was to the Chamber of Agriculture in Oldenburg from 1965-1968 as an adviser on soil fertility. His first foray into the world of overseas agriculture was as a soil surveyor in Libya in 1980-1981, where he was greatly entranced by the desert world. From 1981-1991 Dr. Mutert worked for the renowned Bünthof Agricultural Research Station of Kali und Salz in Hanover, Germany, and its extension service for fertilizer use on soils and in cropping systems in the tropics and subtropics. During frequent travels worldwide, he initiated fertilizer experiments on farms in close collaboration with national and international research stations. These visits were combined with lectures on soil fertility, delivered with infectious passion to students and advisers, and the dissemination of his own papers on balanced mineral crop nutrition. While at Bünthof, Dr. Mutert was also a representative of IPI in Berne, Switzerland, working in close contact with Dr. Helmut von Uexküll, then the PPI/IPI representative in Southeast Asia.

In 1991, Dr. Mutert was selected to succeed Dr. von Uexküll as Director of the joint program of PPI and IPI based in Singapore. Dr. Mutert worked tirelessly and continuously to bring attention to and develop pragmatic agricultural technology for Southeast Asia's uplands, using his practical experience from South Sumatra. He championed the case for the use of P fertilizer to bring fertility to Southeast Asia's low fertility status upland soils and to increase the productivity of small-scale farmers in Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma, Philippines, Cambodia, and Laos.

He campaigned hard, and at first alone, to achieve a place for mineral fertilizers in Vietnam's program for agricultural improvement following Doi Moi (or 'change and newness' to create a 'market economy with socialist direction') by forging close ties with Vietnam's leaders in agriculture policymaking. In partnership with Vietnamese colleagues who became close friends, Dr. Mutert supported a nationwide program on balanced fertilization between 1994 and 2002, during which time Vietnam became a net



Dr. Mutert (center) was always popular among the people in Southeast Asia and other regions where he worked.

rice exporter and achieved world significance as a coffee producer. Many will remember his ability to motivate people to improve the productivity of these systems while standing knee-deep in the mud or on steep slopes in the uplands with words from outside the science lexicon, such as: "I believe it can be done and we shall succeed if we implement the ideas we developed together."

Dr. Mutert was quick to recognize the importance of building new initiatives to raise productivity of Southeast Asia's lowland rice fields after the impetus of the green revolution began to wane in the 1980s. He was instrumental in organizing support for a major research program at the International Rice Research Institute in Los Baños that included significant contributions from IFA, IPI, and PPI. He was also a great supporter of oil palm development in Southeast Asia, recognizing the importance of developing sustainable oil palm production systems. He was a valued consultant to a number of leading plantation companies and research stations in Malaysia and Indonesia.

A relentless traveler, Dr. Mutert was able to survive on the road for extended periods with his battered pilot case as his only companion. He was able, as if by magic, to draw a smart suit and shoes or field clothes and a pair of training shoes from his bag as the circumstances required. On field trips, he could move seamlessly from a bed on the floor of a farmer's house in a remote part of Sumatra to a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture in Jakarta the following day. Although a shy man, Dr. Mutert had the ability to bring out the most social side of both old friends and new acquaintances. He loved the natural world and the farmer's field, and was a natural philosopher. He will be remembered by his many friends of all ages for long evening discussions on 'agri-culture', with occasional digressions into a myriad of other topics. In a world now dominated by specialists, we remember Dr. Mutert's special ability to contribute to and participate in discussions covering the length and breadth of issues relating to agriculture and rural development. We send heart-felt condolences to his family in Germany. **BC**

— Prepared by Dr. Thomas Fairhurst, Singapore, with contributions from Dr. Mutert's many friends and colleagues.



Dr. Mutert