

## Dispelling the myth on the use of timber products in Building, construction and interior design



Malaysian Timber Council's chief executive officer Cheah Kam Huan at his office.

With the growing awareness and benefits of going green and the emphasis on using sustainable materials for building, construction and interior design, wood and timber products have often been misunderstood as being non-sustainable. B&I recently caught up with Cheah Kam Huan, chief executive officer of Malaysian Timber Council (MTC). MTC is the champion for the marketing and promotion of wood products in Malaysia and overseas.

### **B&I: Can you tell us about MTC's history and primary objectives?**

**MTC:** MTC was officially launched on 10 January 1992 during a time of controversies on environmental issues. In the late 80's and the early 90's, there were a lot of debates on issues like illegal logging, deforestation and environmental protection during the run-up to the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The global community was looking at countries with large tracts of tropical forests and Malaysia was unfortunately dragged into the highly-charged debates. Some "green" activists were campaigning for a blanket ban on tropical timber products while some even called for tourists to boycott Malaysia and for foreign direct investments (FDIs) to be withdrawn. Amid the tension and the misinformation being generated, the Malaysian government



Wood is a naturally renewable resource.

and the timber industry felt they had to do something to address the issues, especially by educating the public. What was needed was an organisation which could do this, as well as promote and reinforce a positive image for the industry. Hence the setting up of the Malaysian Timber Council.

MTC then had to strategise and co-ordinate its activities and champion the Malaysian cause. One of its initial tasks was to tackle the anti-tropical hardwood campaign and to engage global NGOs in debates to correct misconceptions that Malaysia was not managing her forests properly. Even some Malaysians were starting to believe the propaganda so MTC had to work hard to inform the public with information brochures, literature and roadshows to explain that our forests are not being destroyed but rather Malaysia has been implementing good forestry practices since 1901. This was crucial as the local timber industry was growing and becoming more export-oriented as the demand for wood increased.

In 1998, the government gave MTC the mandate to promote the local timber industry overseas through trade promotion and marketing, so we took on this additional role.

We are also helped the government to initiate the programme for forest plantation development. Based on several studies commissioned by MTC, the programme was initiated in 2006 and today the government has embarked on plantation forestry development on a large scale.

The forest plantation development programme's main objective is to plant 375,000 hectares of fast-growing tree species over a 15-year period. The government started in 2006 so by around 2020, we should be seeing the results. Some of the species include rubberwood, acacia mangium and some local species.

In a nutshell, MTC's role is basically to help the timber industry in terms of marketing, industry development and augmenting raw material supply, as well as image building through issue management.

**B&I: How is MTC funded and what are some of the current activities?**

**MTC:** Since 1990, the government imposed a levy on the export of selected wood products. Between 1992 and 1998, some of the money from the levy fund was used to defray MTC's operational expenses. In 1998, MTC was given

an Endowment Fund and since then, we have been drawing on the income generated by the Endowment Fund to finance our expenditure. The fund is managed by a team of professional fund managers, with oversight by an Investment Management Committee.

Besides the HQ in Kuala Lumpur, we have three overseas offices – one in London taking care of the European market, one in Dubai which takes care of the Middle East market and one in Shanghai which oversees the market in China and the Far East. We participate in international trade fairs, organise business visits and conduct seminars, workshops, roadshows and lectures. We also conduct technology acquisition and raw material sourcing missions, among others.

Our focus now is on emerging markets like Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Russia). We also focus on the gulf region like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. We bring trade delegations to these countries for business-to-business transactions, factory visits and to better understand how they use timber products.

We are also planning marketing missions to the US, India,

Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and island states like Maldives, Mauritius, Reunion Islands and many other countries. A few of our Malaysian wood contractors have even managed to successfully bid for resort projects in Maldives and are now looking for projects in other island states such as Mauritius, Reunion Island and Seychelles. In our business, we are interested in meeting developers of projects overseas and we support architects in the proper use and application of timber products. We would like those in the industry to check our website for activities planned for the industry such as upcoming missions and to participate in them. We also conduct lecture series and seminars where we invite overseas speakers to give talks to industry members.

We have produced coffee-table and reference books which highlight properties, buildings and interiors which use timber products extensively and in a creative way. We have also produced technical guidebooks for use by specifiers and the industry. Our next guidebook will be launched in mid-July 2009.

**B&I: There is the belief that wood is not weather-resistant and prone to termite attacks. What is your view on this?**

**MTC:** Firstly, we have to understand that there are 2,500 wood species, out of which there are about 100 species of commercial wood with over 50 species that are more commonly used. We have four categories of wood – heavy hardwood, hardwood, medium hardwood, and softwood. To use the right wood for the right purpose, architects and designers have to specify their application accordingly. For example, some wood species like Chengal, Merbau, Kulim and Surian are naturally termite-resistant. Medium hardwood like Meranti which is popular in Europe is highly suitable for interior use, and if used in the exterior, should be properly treated.

**B&I: There is a public mindset that wood is not eco-friendly, cutting down of trees causes global warming and so on. What do you say to this?**

**MTC:** Forests are naturally renewable. We cut down the big trees and leave the small trees to grow. The problem arises only when the harvest rate exceeds the growth rate. Some hardwood species, for example, takes up to 80 years to grow to commercial sizes, making them more scarce and more expensive. In Malaysia, all forest land are state-owned and the states need to monitor the activities in the forest to prevent over logging and illegal logging.

**B&I: In some countries, there is a certification scheme which identifies timber products coming from a**



B&I editor Eric Tan with MTC's Cheah Kam Huan.

**sustainable forest. Is there such a scheme in Malaysia?**

**MTC:** Yes, we have an organisation called the Malaysian Timber Certification Council which runs a scheme called the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS). It's now fast gaining recognition in many countries around the world especially in Europe. Thus far, the MTCS is recognized by 7 countries and authorities, including Denmark, France, Japan, the UK, the Netherlands and the City of Hamburg. Recently it was also endorsed by PEFC (Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes), a council of private forest owners in Europe.

**B&I: Lastly, is there anything you wish to highlight to our readers?**

**MTC:** Yes, don't be afraid to use wood. Get proper advice from the experts or contact us. Wood is a beautiful product which is natural and is environmentally friendly because it traps carbon forever, and it can be recycled many times over. Contrary to popular belief, Malaysian wood does come from sustainably managed forests which have been MTCS-certified. Yes, it may require a small investment to use wood but provided it is properly specified, it is longer-lasting compared to other building materials, thus making it a more cost-efficient choice in the long run. ■

For more information, call Malaysian Timber Council at +603-9281 1999, visit [www.mtc.com.my](http://www.mtc.com.my) or e-mail [council@mtc.com.my](mailto:council@mtc.com.my)