

A CHALLENGE TO THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC COCONUT
COMMUNITY : MAKE THE COCONUT COMPETITIVE BE-
FORE THE 21ST CENTURY

By

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Abstract

Participants at the APCC COCOTECH Meeting are invited to debate each of the six topics that have been identified on the basis that throughout the present century, the coconut has been grown by methods developed in the previous century (or earlier). The intention is to develop a spontaneous, "think-tank", problem-solving approach to make sure the coconut community enters the next century with something more than a mere subsistence crop.

Introduction

Coconut specialists gathered at the APCC COCOTECH Meeting are presented with the following six statements as subjects for informal debate:

- First - that throughout the twentieth century the coconut has been grown, processed and marketed using nineteenth century methods;
- Second - that the coconut is now almost entirely a subsistence crop;
- Third - that current research and development technology has failed to appreciate this situation;

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- Fourth - that the natural properties that give coconut an advantage over other oil crops have been almost totally ignored;
- Fifth - that the APCC COCOTECH specialists are the only ones who can correct the situation; and
- Sixth - that they must start HERE and NOW if they want the coconut to be competitive in the twenty-first century.

The APCC COCOTECH specialists are challenged to argue these points and to say what, if anything, they propose to do about them in their own areas of expertise.

Findings

The brief comments included under each of the six sections are intended to stimulate some controversy before the meeting so that questions and answers, arguments and counter-arguments, can be prepared in advance.

Throughout the twentieth century the coconut has been grown, processed and marketed using nineteenth century methods.

The methods that developed in the nineteenth century simply took advantage of a situation that had already existed for many centuries during the days of sailing ships. Coconuts were available around the tropics. They had been planted by native cultivators and had been promoted by some colonial governments to provide coir fibre for ships' ropes and clean drinking water (steam ships can produce, store and refrigerate their own drinking water). The hand labour required to harvest peel and crack coconuts was available and was cheap.

The coconut is now almost entirely a subsistence crop.

Coconuts can still be found growing on well - managed estates, and there will always be a place for efficient estates in the future. But most countries where coconuts grow have a large agricultural population who plant a few coconuts every year to provide income and food security for their families. Such planting go on even without government replanting programmes. The level of care and management that is given to many of these palms once they survive the seedling stage is so low as to be invisible. This is subsistence agriculture applied to coconut.

Current research and development technology has failed to appreciate this situation.

Research and development programmes invariably talk about increasing the productivity of the coconut industry. They are aimed at increasing copra yield or disease resistance as if these factors are what limit coconut production. Or attention is given to improving existing farming systems or traditional processing equipment. It is time to stand to one side and ask if there is not better ways to increase efficiency and thus productivity.

The natural properties that give coconut an advantage over other oil crops have been almost totally ignored.

In Britain, there is a television advertisement for a popular chocolate - covered coconut sweet that shows a coconut - without husk - falling from the palm and conveniently splitting open to reveal attractive, fresh, clean white endosperm. It is a good advertisement but so much is taken for granted and left unsaid about just what are the processes needed to produce this product. Yet like all good fantasies, there is a grain of truth in this one. Coconuts do fall from the palm - given the right variety growing under the right conditions. Coconuts can easily produce high quality ball copra without all the laborious peeling and cracking that is usually employed - given the right variety processed under the right conditions. The knowledge and the technology are known but they are hardly applied. Why not?

The APCC COCOTECH specialists are the only ones who can correct the situation.

For too long, the direction of coconut research and development has been set by European research organizations and North American funding agencies. Whatever fine words they dress their proposals in, their main concern is to ensure a supply of vegetable oil to world trade, that is to say to European and North American industries. Wider issues are at stake and the APCC representatives are aware of these on a daily basis. Land use, labour employment, product substitution, power generation and other similar topics are more important - in the coconut producing countries.

Any attempt to change the situation must start HERE and NOW if the coconut is to be competitive in the twenty-first century.

If we have not already left it too late!

Discussion

Any discussion of these topics, outside the initial arguments made to stimulate thought, must await the outcome of the discussion that is generated among the participants of the APCC COCOTECH Meeting.

Conclusions

The delegates at the APCC COCOTECH Meeting will form their own conclusions. It is this writer's conclusion that not only can something be done, but that the coconut is in an excellent position to recover the place relegated to oil palm and to the mechanisable temperate oil crops.

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