

# Green heart of Africa

by Meindert Brouwer

For almost 25 years Cameroon-born Emmanuel Ze Meka (1951) served the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), of which the last eight years as Executive Director. In November 2015 Ze Meka stepped down. Law enforcement and innovation in agriculture are key elements to reduce deforestation in Central Africa, he says. A conversation with a forest veteran about forests and biodiversity in the green heart of Africa and what has to be done to keep it green.

Ze Meka grew up near the forest, a hundred kilometres south of the capital of Yaoundé. He recalls going into the forest as a child in the late 1950's: 'My parents were farmers and I was involved in many activities in the forest, such as cash-crop farming, mainly cocoa, food crop farming, such as cassava and ground nut. I also accompanied my father to trap wildlife for our family consumption. At that time, wildlife was very abundant in the forest and bush meat represented a sizable part of our diet. I also accompanied my father to go fishing. Our trips in the forest were very enjoyable and exciting, as we could collect nuts, barks, mushrooms on the way and when the season was suitable, caterpillars. Forest was the centre of our life and it provided generously what we needed, even medicine.'



Emmanuel Ze Meka

The forest of his youth has changed dramatically. Ze Meka: 'Now wildlife is scarce, because of the use of guns. During my childhood, we used to set traps with forest rope. Certain types of mushrooms are disappearing, for example those we used to collect around the rivers, as those areas are now being used for commercial maize farming. Trees that were attracting caterpillars are being cut indiscriminately. Rivers are drying up.'

**LIVELIHOOD** 'Nevertheless,' Ze Meka observes, 'the people of communities in Central Africa still rely on the forests for their livelihood. The forest also represents very important cultural and spiritual values as it is intimately linked with people's social activities and interests, customary beliefs and