

# AAINews

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## Encounter with a New Frontier – Traveling through East Timor

Like extremely cold high latitude polar regions and alpine areas, arid regions are one of our planet's last frontiers. These areas have a highly limited cropping potential, and traditionally they could only support low intensity livestock farming. The livestock farming that evolved in these marginal areas is not only a development target sector for poverty alleviation and livelihood improvement but also I feel that it provides more positive and important suggestions regarding our concerns over the future of global food production. Livestock farming in arid or alpine regions has a function to convert grass resources that we cannot consume, into food using the ability of livestock. From this viewpoint, in a time when there is increasingly serious competition between human and livestock over food crops, livestock farming development in arid regions is likely to receive renewed attention as a means of securing sustainable and stable future food production. This has a relevance to the current situation of farming and mountain villages in Japan, where there is rapid depopulation and increasing abandonment of farming plots due to the aging population and young people leaving villages. In this mountainous country Japan, how should we reuse mountain slopes where people can no longer live? Use of marginal lands is one of the important themes of our work.

Incidentally, I have been "immersed in" arid regions outside Japan throughout my career, and livestock farming in the tropics was something which was alien to me. As a student, I majored in grass in cold temperate regions, and my work has been concentrating on livestock farming in arid regions mainly in the Middle East. Therefore, there had been no opportunity to deal with grass in warm areas in the tropics and sub-tropics. I only listened to stories, with envy, of close seniors who were specializing in tropical livestock farming as part of international cooperation. However, I finally had the opportunity to visit East Timor twice to conduct an investigation, which led me into the world of livestock farming in the tropics.

Despite its recent independence, the political and economic situation in East Timor still remains unstable. Although there is still a lot of work to be done, one cannot help feeling for the East Timorese who are trying to advance themselves despite their short history as an independent country. Most of all, the first sight of tropical nature was vividly imprinted in my mind as a world full of attractions and beyond my imagination. The climatic condition that repeats the dry season and rainy season, fierce rainfalls, the red soil which had lost the top soil, slash and burn shifting agriculture, bustling fishing markets in the streets and at ports surrounded by turquoise water, and a variety of tropical fruits and palm spirits – all these will stick in my memory. People are living traditionally, keeping their simple ways of living in mountain areas.

Looking at the livestock farming sector, one notices that the livestock in East Timor is raised for use at ceremonial occasions and as assets, as the term 'livestock' literally means. Cattle are a status symbol of the rich, and small stock such as goats and pigs are used as sacrifices at traditional ceremonies. Livestock is a precious protein source and is also important as a cashable property. Moreover, for people, livestock is an insurance to diffuse the risks of crop failures of the slash and burn crop production that they practice under conditions characterized by unstable rainfall and droughts. On the other hand, grass species growing on the poor soil tend to become rough and hard during the dry season. Chronic livestock diseases caused by low nutrition and associated mortality will be identified as points that require improvement. In addition, invasive and harmful weeds that spread over rangelands have become troublesome as they cover and kill useful grass species. Although my visits were short, the tropical and mountainous country of East Timor, with its clear dry and rainy seasons, has surely become my new frontier.

(By Koga, May 2008)



Bustling market



Rising smoke from slash and burn farming



Bathing a cattle herd