



JOHN DIXON LEEFE O.B.E.

1924 - 2011

**Former British Forestry Project Somalia Team Leader,
Co-founder and Hon. President of the Somali Ecological Society**

John Dixon Leefe OBE, the former Principal of Afgooye Forestry and Wildlife Training School, British Forestry Project Somalia Team Leader has died peacefully in his 86th year at his home in Burniston, England, UK. John was also the Co-founder of the Somali Ecological Society (SES) and served as Hon. President of the Somali Ecological Society.

Following active service during the Second World War John completed his forestry training at Aberdeen University. He was later appointed junior lecturer at the Forestry Training School at Parkend, in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, England.

In 1956 John was appointed by the British Colonial Service as Principal of the Cyprus Forestry College. In addition to his Greek and Turkish students John was responsible for the training and welfare of men from places such as The Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Jordan and British Somaliland. Later John returned to Cyprus in 1972 to run the same forestry school.

John also saw service in Liberia, West Africa from 1978, where he helped establish a new forestry training institute for the Mano River Union. Midway through his four-year stay, a military coup was staged, led by Sgt. Samuel Doe, who overthrew the Government and killed President William Tolbert. John also spent time in Nepal, Tanzania and Cameroon.

Although John took "early retirement", he was not the kind of person to actually retire. So in 1981, came another call came from the British Government's Overseas Development Administration to go to Somalia to re-invigorate and develop forestry training, and to lead a British Forestry Technical Support team. In mid 1983 it was a great delight to John and his wife Sybil when the first important official to greet him at Mogadishu was one of his ex-students from Cyprus, now Director General of Ministry of Livestock, Range and Wildlife.

The British and other governments and non-governmental organisations were asked by Somalia to help, initially with supporting refugees (brought about mainly by the aftermath of the Somalia-Ethiopia war, and famine situations), and then with development in general. Forestry support was already being given by FAO and USAID. Britain was able to help in education and training, and also charcoal production support. It was fully recognised by all that the trees and shrubs of Somalia played a vital role in both rural and urban livelihoods. John Leefe headed a team, initially

of three, to give support to the Afgooye Forestry and Wildlife Training College, based at Afgooye, some 40 km outside Mogadishu. The Somali and Pakistani staff were already involved in teaching the young Somalis who had been designated to attend the college. English and maths was already a key component of their education, as well as other background subjects. Practical foresters who could manage woodlands, plantations and protection areas (to reduce soil erosion) were the target for the National Range Agency, under which the college came.

John Leefe was a man who keenly desired to give opportunities to all to "be the best that they could be". He set high standards, and worked hard to achieve them. He had huge energy, despite being in his late 50's, and it was hard to keep up with him, even for the youngest of staff and students. He spent time talking to those in authority, and assessed the situation on the ground; and using his considerable previous experience, set high goals to achieve. At the same time resources were brought together to ensure that the necessary facilities were developed. John was a very practical man, and sought to give practical education and training, recognising that once a forester was posted, they would need all the resources they could muster – so developing a capacity to "think problems through" and be self reliant was an important part of the education and training.



**AFWTC Student Practical Study Trip – 1986 – Luug Community Forestry Project
John Leefe with Students & Staff**

From the beginning, John had shown a great deal of passion and commitment in providing the best education to student studying at the centre. By using his experiences of teaching forestry and running major forestry institutions in other countries, he began various initiatives to raise the standard. John had great integrity and real sense of justice and this brought him up against some individuals in authority who wanted to interfere in the school affairs, and perhaps to influence the outcome of school examinations. John was put under pressure and characteristically John refused to be cowed by threats and ensured a just and proper outcome. His uncompromising stand against any intervention of school affairs by government authorities, the lack of fear to put his opinion to the senior government officials, and his unwavering support to students and his staff had further increased John's reputation for being fair, hard working and honest man. John had very good working relationship with all relevant government authorities, and in particular, the National Range Agency, and its General Manager Dr Abdullahi Karani, who was a widely respected figure, and provided a great deal of support to the school and John throughout the period John was working in Somalia.

John worked hard to achieve this and was deeply saddened by the later descent of the country into civil war and anarchy when it seemed inevitable this work would be undone.

Evidence from the charcoal project (where it became clear that the local approach to charcoal making in the Baydhabo area was probably one of the most efficient in the world), along with other studies, indicated that for sustainability of supply it was necessary to assess what resources were actually available, and to undertake research. This led to two other forestry activities being added – Forest Inventory, and Forest Research. John was to lead all the teams. Both forestry projects have made a considerable contribution to understanding of the fuel-wood demands and supply in the country and recommended urgent measures needed to reverse the threats of fuel-wood crisis.

Somalia has some rare and unique flora and fauna and typically John stepped in with great energy and commitment, and in his "spare time" started (along with other individuals) the Somali Ecological Society (SES). This society was embraced by the General Manager of the National Range Agency, Dr. Karani, as well as by many others. There were many members, with regular speakers and meetings – it was an exciting time – John's enthusiasm was the main driver. Out of this came several environmental / ecological studies, and with much help, the establishment of a Nature Reserve at Balcad, nearly 20 miles north of Mogadishu along the banks of the Shebelle River, where by excluding sheep and goats, and stopping the cutting of trees, there was some hope of protecting the natural heritage. This was a major achievement. It was undertaken by John engaging local people and expatriates alike, working, and also relaxing together. John was very skilful diplomat and used this to persuade authorities to endorse and support the SES, despite the fact the government was not very keen to encourage development of non-government groups at that time. John worked hard to achieve this, as did many others. John was, as with the other many achievements in Somalia, deeply saddened by the descent into civil war.



Balcad Reserve. Abdi Dahir with Guard – recording research details

At the end of 1980s, the Somali authorities, especially the President, awarded a diploma of honour to John for conservation work in the country, to mark SES achievements, and in setting up Balcad Nature Reserve, as the first nature reserve in the country. Whilst the Balcad Nature Reserve has long ago lost its warden and any infrastructure built there, there is still the Bird book published by the SES. There is also an SES in Somaliland, the Somaliland Ecological Society.



Balcad Reserve – officially established

Sadly towards the end of the 1980's the climate for development changed, with the destruction of many things. Undeterred, John, by then back in the UK, encouraged Somalis, who were now refugees in the UK, to re-establish the SES in the UK in the meantime. Despite the difficult situation in Somalia, there are many positive outcomes. The SES continue its vital work, with the help of John and the Society had sent two fact finding missions to Somalia and Somaliland and organised conference In London to highlight the threats of environmental degradation facing the Somali people. Also, there are many Somalis who are active members of their communities, both in Somalia and in the UK and other countries, who are benefiting from the example and support that John gave them and their families.

Ibrahim Farah, Secretary of the SES and former Student of the Afgooye Forestry and Wildlife Training Centre has paid tribute to John and said that ***“John was very kind, generous, and a great friend to Somali people”***

Another former student of Afgooye School of Forestry and Wildlife training Centre, paid tribute to John Leefe and said ***“for me John Leefe offered me advice, support and guidance which have shaped my career. I could not have wished for a better mentor and teacher. He visited me in Cyprus Forestry College in 1988 when I was attending my High Diploma Course in forestry” “I will miss his generous nature and his remarkable sense of humour”***

John will be sorely missed by his wife and family, and by friends, colleagues and former students.

Compiled by the Leefe Family, Mohamoud Omer Sh. Ibrahim and John Jenks