THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE TO FORESTRY

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Any list of issues consistently to the fore in New Zealand forestry in recent years would certainly include that of the relationship between forestry and the environment. It is rather surprising, therefore, to find how little impact two books concerned entirely with that issue in Australasia have had on the profession, if the New Zealand professional literature is any guide. Yet between them Searle's Rush to Destruction, dealing with the New Zealand situation, and the Routleys' The Fight for the Forests, on the Australian situation, raise all the aspects that people concerned with environmental conservation find objectionable in modern approaches to forestry development.

If forestry in New Zealand is as concerned with environmental aspects as it claims to be, and hence as concerned with uninformed, emotional criticisms of its policies and practices as it seems to be, why then are these comprehensive studies from the opposing point of view apparently regarded as of no concern? Cynical explanations — ignorance, stupidity, indifference — spring too readily to mind to be adequate. Part of the reason might possibly be found in the reviews of the Routleys' book that have appeared in the Australian forestry literature. Almost without exception, they condemn it as a book and as an argument. So why should anyone read it, let alone acquire it? Searle's book, though independent, deals with a similar theme, from a similar bias, and does draw on Routleys' for trans-Tasman corroborative evidence. So, by association it could conceivably be dismissed also. But whatever the explanation, it is hard to suppress the suspicion that expressed attitudes in forestry are not always borne out by actions in practice.

Admittedly New Zealand forestry, in neglecting the publications of another point of view would be in distinguished company. After all, Mein Kampf was ridiculed for its fallacies, falsifications and fantasies, and its warnings were largely ignored. But it was still a fairly accurate preview of things to come. The lesson ought to be obvious but, like most lessons from history, it obviously is not.

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This paper therefore started out to retrieve the position by reviewing Routleys' book with a New Zealand audience in mind. However, it soon became evident that in such a context it had to be taken together with Searle's, and then, in turn, that it was certain aspects of the subject raised by the books that needed to be reviewed, rather than the books themselves. For the most significant question raised by the two books is: How did forestry and conservation manage to move so far away, without anybody noticing, until the differences have become almost irreconcilable?

It is not so long ago that forestry was in the forefront of the conservation movement. Now it has become one of the prime targets of the movement. Somewhere over the last two decades forestry and conservation parted company. And, as so often happens when partnerships dissolve, the separation is much wider and much deeper than merely going separate ways. The conservation movement's view of forestry comes close at times to being one of vitriolic antagonism. Even a quick glance at the two books is enough to show how far forestry is from being conservation, in the modern conservationists' view.

Now that in itself is a rather puzzling development, since the very essence of forestry is conservation. Or is it? Forestry has changed a lot since the days in which it led the conservation movement. Sustained yield, which fundamentally is the core of conservation and the mechanism of forestry, is regarded by some foresters as completely outmoded. Perhaps that view is a bit too extreme, but certainly sustained yield is no longer sacrosanct nor interpreted, as it may once have been, in terms of continuity with the same type of forest on the same site. The old fashioned view of some silviculturalists that to resort to artificial regeneration was an admission of failure, has given way to one in which advocacy of natural regeneration is almost a sign of mental deficiency. Forestry has clearly thrown off a few shackles. It has become less dogmatic, less traditional, more pragmatic and more efficient. In short it has become more business-like, a change which most foresters would consider to be an improvement. But, in doing so, it has, in the modern conservationists' opinion, become the very antithesis of conservation as well as aligning itself with another target of the movement — big business. Forestry is thus doubly condemned. While it may still be conservation by its definitions, those definitions bear no resemblance to conservation in the true believer's sense; while in adopting the philosophy of modern business it has sacrificed long-term public interest to short-term private greed. This makes a rather severe indictment. But the change is only partly because
forestry has changed. The conservation movement too has changed, just as drastically. Conservation is no longer thought of in terms of specific resources in specific places. The domain is now the total environment on a scale transcending the local and at times encompassing the world. At the same time the membership of the movement has changed, and in a way that makes this possibly the most significant factor in the whole dynamics. As a result, forestry no longer has the near monopoly on knowledge relating to forests that it once had.

While there is no point in reviewing the two books here, it is worth summarising some features of their arguments to illustrate the points made above. The argument in both books is derived essentially from the claim that forestry has become concerned only with wood production. Despite proclamations by the forestry organisations to the contrary, the authors find few signs that environmental considerations, as viewed by the Australian and New Zealand Forest Services, are anything but subordinate to wood production. A great deal of each book is concerned with assembling and documenting (largely from official and professional sources) the evidence for that conclusion, and analysing and explaining how that situation has developed and is being maintained. The authors also argue at some length why such a ranking of priorities is wrong and dangerous from the conservation, and therefore the national, point of view.

The main targets of the Routleys' attack are the Australian programmes for softwood plantation development and the expanding wood chip export industry. Both, in their opinion, involve the destruction of too much of the mixed eucalypt forests on the higher site qualities, for dubious ends and at costs far exceeding any reasonable estimate of returns. The premises on which the two programmes have been so painstakingly established — (a) rising domestic demand for industrial wood and diminishing availability of imports; (b) the economic viability of softwood plantations; and (c) the rehabilitation of the cutover indigenous forests by clearfelling — are dissected and found wanting. But it is not an objective analysis and it makes little pretence of being one. It is a case against the State and Commonwealth Forest Services for their mishandling of the resources which it is their responsibility to manage in the public interest. Since it is not objective, it is not fair. But why should it be fair? A case is not the place to be fair. It is the trial which is meant to be fair, not the advocacy.

Searle's critique is directed at the proposals for utilising the South Island beech forests, but applies in principle to indigenous forests of any sort in any part of the country. How-
ever, less emphasis is placed by Searle on questioning the justifications for the proposals. The main effort goes into demonstrating the weaknesses of the assumptions relating to the feasibility and the environmental benignity of the management proposals, particularly with respect to the replacement or enrichment of beech by exotics. In sharp contrast to the Routleys, Searle does attempt to be objective, recognising the honesty of the Forest Service's intentions in some instances, even though castigating its failures to put them into practice. Nevertheless, his book still ends up as a case against the Forest Service's administration of the national forest resource, as far as environmental considerations are concerned.

Despite the similarities of the subject the two books are concerned with, the point of view from which it is approached and the conclusions reached, neither book is a re-hash of the other. Both are intensively, if selectively, researched, and, given the premises, constitute logically argued examinations of separate Australasian examples of a world-wide issue. But they are independent and they differ somewhat in the development of their arguments. The Routleys' incisive analysis shows their background in philosophy and logic; Searle's ecosystem approach befits a natural scientist. Both of course venture, as they have to, into fields outside their own specialty, and they do so with mixed success, as the reviewers referred to earlier are not slow to point out.

But it is in their prescriptions for what should be done about the problem that the two books differ most significantly. The Routleys, while acknowledging that some individual foresters have their priorities right (i.e., the same as the Routleys), see little hope in the present institutional set-up. The forestry establishment, in their judgement, is too tightly bound to wood production — by ideology, by choice and by self-created circumstances — to be able to extricate itself. The only hope for sound (by their criteria) environmentally based forest management is to remove all forests which have a significant environmental role from Forest Service control.

Searle, on the other hand, does not see the Forest Service as beyond redemption. Therefore his proposals for corrective action include a large measure of strengthening the Forestry Service's hand and resolve in developing and maintaining sound (by his criteria) forest management.

Incidentally the independence of the two books is highlighted by the Routleys' use of the New Zealand softwood expansion programme as an argument against the Australian programmes. Yet that New Zealand programme is one of the objects of Searle's strictures. The possibility thus arises that, should Searle's arguments prevail in New Zealand, then the
Routleys' case against the Australian programme could lose some of its cogency. This seems like another example — a mirror image one, in a way — of the ridiculous but chronic propensity both countries have shown for planning their forest policies in isolation from each other.

No doubt each book has had a considerable influence on the conservation issue and movement in the country it refers to: the attacks on timber production forestry are too well directed for them to have been completely ineffective. But it is the influence that they have had on forestry that is more important for present purposes.

The conservation movement which evoked the two books has drawn a number of reactions from forestry. Somewhat significantly there has not yet been a major work of rebuttal of the magnitude, stature or appeal of the two books which have made the case against timber production forestry, or production forestry as it is commonly, but erroneously, called. There must be some reason for that. Perhaps it lies in the nature of the reactions that have occurred. For they amount in effect to saying that the split between forestry and conservation that led to the attacks on forestry does not really exist; or if it does, it does not matter, or is rather easily put right. The rationalisation, for that is what it amounts to, occurs in a number of versions, which fall into two classes. In one, it is argued that it is only a matter of time before public opinion swings against the extreme arm of the conservation movement which has caused the split. In the other, some justification for the criticisms is acknowledged, but, since the necessary changes are well within the capacity of forestry the situation can soon be corrected.

One widely held, if not widely published, version of what might be called the “it does not matter school” is that the conservation movement is led — misled perhaps — and dominated by cranks and fanatics. That single-mindedness leads to tactics and language in which no dirty trick or innuendo is too low, since the end justifies the means. It also leads to initial and spectacular success. But many of the exaggerations are so clearly fantastic, the manipulation of the facts so careless and blatant, that it is only a matter of time before reason once again prevails.

In fact it is not hard to find evidence to support this view, if it is what you want to believe. In each of the reviews of the Routleys' book, factual errors, miscalculations, selective misquoting, plausible but invalid comparisons are pointed out almost ad nauseam. Searle's appeals to mercantilism can be shown to include solecisms of the same class. The backlash may even be starting, as the economic difficulties of the mid-
seventies make it advisable to have a second look at some of the implications of the earlier euphoria for the environment.

Another version is also based on the inherent weakness of the conservation movement associated with its composition. In this view the movement is essentially an upper-middle class, urban one, led by people in comfortable circumstances, engaged in providing services rather than commodities; well-educated, well-connected and articulate, and recruited from dependent classes such as students. Their influence is clearly so far out of proportion to their numbers and the membership so unrepresentative that it obviously cannot be anything but a temporary phenomenon. Again as economic realities force another look at the resource use-conservation equation a more balanced view must prevail.

A third version of the “it does not matter” school does not rely on defects in the composition of the conservation movement for its rationalisation. It may even recognise some degree of justification in the movement’s stand against the wastefulness of virtually unrestrained resource utilisation, especially in the developing countries. But the exaggerated form of reaction which has caught the public imagination clearly has no future. It represents an unrealistic luxury approach to resource conservation that must be just as ephemeral as the luxury approach to resource use that it condemns.

In other words, the rift between forestry and conservation does not matter because it is an artificial one and cannot in any case last. The wise use of forest resources that is the forestry definition of conservation, must in time become the working approach to resource conservation and the environment. It certainly is a comfortable and comforting philosophy; if only it were right.

The second group of reactions from forestry to the attacks by the conservation movement takes quite the opposite view. It believes that here is a real rift between forestry and conservation and that it does matter. It recognises that forestry has been at fault both in contributing to the rift and in allowing it to develop. But it does not accept all the blame. After all, it also feels that fanaticism in the conservation movement has played a major role in forcing the interests further apart than they really are, through distorting facts, issues and motives. Nevertheless, the main effort to close the gap must come from the forestry side.

This group also includes different versions of what went wrong and what needs to be done about it. Two of these versions have very important implications. One version holds that timber production forestry has run into public disfavour, not because it is wrong or wrongly executed, but because the
rationale behind it has not been properly or widely explained. That is, forestry has failed to get its story across, thus leaving the field open to uninformed criticism and misinforming propaganda. What needs to be done therefore is obvious. The public needs to be educated, public relations improved, and the image of forestry restored. Impressed perhaps by the proven power of Madison Avenue to sell almost anything from presidents and crusades to cars and potato chips, it seems that the main action needed is a sophisticated, professional public relations and education programme.

A second version of the "it does matter but" school does recognise the need for changes in the objectives and methods of forest management. In effect it admits that, in responding first to the timber demands of the war, followed immediately by the urgency of the post-war housing shortage, then by the industrialisation and urbanisation boom, and more recently by the drive to save and earn foreign exchange, forestry did become over-impressed by the relative importance of the wood production function. The conservation movement has therefore served a particularly useful purpose in forcing attention to the fact that timber production is not necessarily the most important function of forestry, or even, at times, a significant one. Since foresters have long used the argument that forestry is concerned with other things than timber production, in order to gain political and budgetary support, it is perhaps salutary that it took the conservation movement to bring home to them what their claims really meant. But now that has been done, the multiple-purpose management of forests can be safely left to forestry. It is only a matter of applying what is already known and supplementing that knowledge with properly oriented research and development.

In other words, the rift between forestry and conservation does matter but it is fairly readily bridged by public education and by practising what is preached. It again is a comfortable and comforting philosophy, if it is true.

Some may be inclined to the view that the above classification of the responses of forestry to the environmental challenge is a caricature. Certainly it is simplified and perhaps it is incomplete, but all of the above views are aired often enough in conversation and discussion, and can be inferred from the literature, to suspect that it is not fundamentally wrong. It would, however, be better if it were wrong, because the comfortable philosophy that all versions lead to is a dangerous one.

Unfortunately, it is not hard to find evidence that suggests that the environmental cause is losing its political sting. Declining influence and status of ministries and agencies concerned with environmental matters; over-riding of recom-
mendations favouring environmental causes; increasing attention being given or allowed in the press to the less than fanatical environmental views; over-shadowing of environmental issues or concern by economic events and difficulties, for instance, all point to the evolution of a more balanced or more realistic (as some might say) general attitude. The unfortunate part comes in the too facile extrapolation of that trend to forestry. In fact, the development, if it is occurring and is maintained, does not give much justification for a complacent philosophy in forestry.

Two reasons for caution are worth considering. The first is that few of the decisions going in favour of the production interest involve forestry in a primary role. If that is so and continues, then one of the key elements in the philosophy of complacency may not hold. The second is that there is very little evidence of a decline in public concern for environmental matters corresponding to the apparent decline in their political influence. If that is right, then any political downgrading of the environmental issue can only be temporary.

Thus forestry has no real reason for complacency in the conservation case. All the signs leading to optimism, or the bases for confidence, convince foresters only. In effect, by concentrating on technical and factual weaknesses in the case against it, as exemplified by the Routleys' and Searle's books, forestry has missed the whole point. Forestry is seen as belonging to two institutions which have become increasingly suspect — big Government and big business. Thus forestry can no longer be relied on to act on or guard the public interest. The real challenge posed by the conservation case against forestry is therefore not simply that what is done is wrong and being done wrongly. That is part of the issue but only a small part. The fundamental point is that forestry does not have the right to decide what forests should be used for, in the first place. The point is perhaps only implicit in Searle's argument, but the Routleys' development of it is possibly the most interesting and certainly one of the most important features of their book.

The choice between the primacy of timber production and the primacy of environmental considerations can only be made on the basis of value judgements. It does not matter how much the case for one or the other is dressed up with regression analysis, cost-benefit analysis, semantic analysis or jargon, the choice can only be made on the basis of what somebody thinks (or can be convinced) is more important. There is no reason why the forester's judgement (as the conservationists see it) that timber is the more important, should prevail over the conservation judgement that environment is
more important. (Nor vice versa for that matter, although that possibility is naturally not emphasised in writings by conservationists.) Foresters, by knowledge, training and experience, may be better qualified than others to decide how specific objectives can be best fulfilled by forests, although the two books at times tend to doubt even that. But those qualifications make them no more, and perhaps less suited than others to say what those specific objectives ought to be.

But the question of the forester's qualifications to decide what forests should be managed, for what purposes, is not the important one. The point is not whether foresters have the ability to make that choice, but whether they have the right. Decisions involving conflicting values are, as the Routley's argue, political decisions. The choice of objectives for State forests is clearly a political problem, not a technical one; and it may even be partly so in the case of industrial forests. Strangely enough that is entirely consistent with forest management theory. It has always been conceded in forest management texts that the owner is the one who has the right and responsibility to select the objectives. If then foresters have, as the conservationists claim, been wrongfully deciding on objectives, it is not by usurpation as the conservationists tend to imply. It can only come about by delegation or by default on the part of the owners, represented in Australia and New Zealand by their parliaments. Since most Forest Acts show that the power to decide policy has not been delegated, the position must have arisen by default. Clearly forests, like anything else, cannot be managed in any way, until the objectives have been decided. If that has been done by foresters, it has been because they were the only ones prepared to decide. If, in doing so, they have chosen the wrong objectives, whatever the reasons, then it is up to those who think that way to get the objectives changed by those who should have decided them in the first place. And that is precisely what the conservation movement is about. Since those changes can only be effected through the political process, only the most naive could be surprised that the tactics are unfair, one-sided, ruthless and distorted. They have to be.

Perhaps that may not have been necessary if the Australian and New Zealand legal systems provided opportunities, such as exist in the United States of America, for such issues to be aired and decided in the courts. Increasing recognition seems to have been given to the right of individuals and private organisations to contest, in the public interest, decisions and actions of government agencies considered to be contrary to it. In effect, it is accepted that government institutions, originally set up to protect the public interest, can come in
time to act against the public interest. Some way for that interest to be represented needs therefore to be available. In providing such an avenue the courts have become arbiters in conflicts of values as well as of law. They do that however not by supplanting the legislature but by supplementing it, in that they interpret, deduce or estimate the way the legislature weighed the conflicting values at the time of the specific enactment in question.

However, it is hard to see that the developments along those lines have really taken much heat out of the conflict in the United States. Politically oriented criticisms of the actions and policies of governmental and industrial forestry seem to continue, unabated either in frequency or intensity. In fact, all that seems to have happened is that an additional, rather than an alternative channel has opened up to the conservation movement. Perhaps additional channels are needed, but it is obviously impossible to move such issues, or decisions having political implications, out of the field and techniques of politics.

What then are the implications of all of that for forestry? Are there any in fact that are not already well known? Perhaps not, but even the obvious needs to be pointed out occasionally and this could be one of the occasions.

The essential point that needs to be made is that the environmental movement does have a case against forestry, but it is not quite the case that many foresters seem to think has been answered satisfactorily. The dispute is over two aspects of the foresters' apparent preference for timber production as the primary function of forests and forestry in New Zealand and Australia: first whether foresters have the right to make that choice, and, secondly, whether they have chosen correctly. The environmental case against forestry as exemplified by the two books therefore reduces to four sequentially derived allegations to the effect that:

1. Foresters have usurped the right to choose the objectives of management for State forests;

2. In exercising that arrogated right they accord the primary function to timber production;

3. In selecting timber production as the primary objective they have chosen wrongly;

4. In identifying exotic plantations as the most productive and economic means for implementing timber production they have under-valued indigenous forests as well as over-valuing the exotics.
That case has not yet been answered. It is not likely to lapse, even if the environmental cause in general does wane. And at the best it is only partially answered by exposing its arithmetical errors, its simplified assumptions, its silvicultural naivete and its exaggerated claims. In fact, that approach almost dodges the real issue. Following the sequence from the basic question of the responsibility for public choice decisions leads to the crucial issue — does forestry really ascribe highest priority to timber production? If it does not then the evidence from forestry practice needs to be seen to be much less inconsistent with environmental values than it now frequently is. If it does then the arguments showing why that is the right choice will need to be much more convincing than they are. But that leads on to treacherous ground. If the primary function of state forestry is timber production what then is the justification for state forestry?

Of course it can be objected that posing the issue in general, "either/or" terms, is ridiculous. The primary objective for forestry cannot be decided generally for all forests for all time. In reality the choice will be made for specific forests, depending on the circumstances in each specific instance. Thus in some forests timber production may be the dominant objective, in others environmental values. But the questions still remain — in any specific instance who decides what will be dominant and how? Thus nothing is changed by moving from the general to the specific. The same case still stands to be answered.

How to go about doing that, and who is to do it, raise difficult questions. One of the difficulties is that it may not be possible: a definitive answer to a conflict over values is a tall order to fill. A second difficulty is that nobody (or no institution) on the forestry side can be seen so plausibly as Friends of the Earth or the Research School of Social Sciences, to be independent of vested economic interests. But, difficult or not, the task needs to be tackled. A good way to start would be by giving some serious attention to the two books which so conveniently show how it can be done from one point of view.

REFERENCES

The paper puts forward some ideas prompted by re-reading Routleys' and Searle's books in the light of some reviews from the forestry side and some random articles and comments bearing on the subject. Since it is not a systematic, critical review of the literature or of the subject, it seems a bit pretentious to dress it up as one. However, it may be worth knowing what material went into forming — positively or negatively — the ideas presented. The main ones involved, in approximate order of influence, rather than alphabetically, or chronologically are:


