DEAR DEPARTED INDIGENOUS FORESTRY

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In June last year, the Minister of Forests, Mr Venn Young, delivered the traditional Sanderson Memorial Lecture to the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, and in his address outlined the perspective and intention of the Forest Service’s new indigenous forest policy. More importantly, he sketched a scenario for the immediate future which sees the decline of indigenous milling and its virtual extinction in many localities. Because his prognosis was unequivocally bleak, and so specific in its geography, it came as a surprise to see such little response from the public and news media. Even on the West Coast, an area to be most severely affected, reaction was torpid — the region seeming like a punch-drunk boxer lurching back from but another blow.

Those familiar with New Zealand’s overall forestry scene were scarcely surprised by the general tenor of Mr Young’s speech. It has long been apparent that sooner or later the country’s podocarp-rich stands would be exhausted of their existing merchantable sawtimber, and that significant regenerated or ingrowth volumes would not become available for at least a century or more. The size of this second forest will be far less than the initial virgin area as a result of wholesale conversion to pasture, croplands, scrub, and lately pine plantations. Quality and composition of this renewed forest are generally disappointing as well, because of inherently poor regenerative capacity and past harvesting by traditionally laissez-faire methods. In essence, the production native forests of this country have been grossly overcut — present yields cannot be sustained and the attendant timber industry has now been formally warned that the piper must soon be paid.

In areas such as the West Coast where indigenous milling acts as a cornerstone of rural survival, this inevitable collapse in the sawlog resource has been recognised for some time and worked towards. As State forests have long provided the bulk of the timber cut, so the Forest Service has acted to create a new, but exotic, resource whose size would sustain the local sawmilling industry at its existing level. This policy has been operative for at least a decade, and broadly speaking the con-

version programme appears successful in achieving its aims. Forestry people are matter of fact about this policy and most anticipated a tight period in the first five years or so of change-over, a result of delays in developing effective conversion methods and the late planting start-up time. More seriously, a few localities such as Buller/Karamea were denied exotic conversion and/or afforestation till recently, administrative anomalies complicating the sincere departmental goal of maintaining regional well-being.

Unfortunately, this cautiously optimistic state of affairs no longer exists for the West Coast. The Minister revealed in his address that drastic shortfalls in immediate timber resources occur in several areas and it now becomes obvious that many sawmills will be out of local native wood long before the replacement pines are ready for use. Government now faces contractual commitments to mills in the form of long-term sales that can only be honoured through distant transport of wood and pitiless severance of short-term Block Sales.

Although Mr Young was honest enough to outline the reality of his opinions on indigenous milling through the specific West Coast example, he was understandably reluctant to spell out just what consequences the region would experience. To appreciate them it is pertinent to describe the current nature of the industry. The bulk of the timber cut arises from contracted Long-term Sales between the State and relatively large modern mills. The Sales were entered into in the hope of encouraging stability and fostering local timber processing. These mills are generally located adjacent to regional centres such as Harihari or Greymouth. The remaining cut is produced by small, long-standing mills in scattered rural towns; log supplies arise from Block Sales. Such Sales are not regarded by the State as constituting a commitment. There is nothing underhand about this; millers cannot plead ignorance of the insecurity of Block Sales though some may raise uncomfortable questions over the efficiencies of larger Long-term Sale-holders. These efficiencies, together with other factors, should have seen the natural death of small operators but did not. The implication of the Minister's speech is essentially notice of a very rapid end to West Coast Block Sales of podocarps, as clearly they are incompatible with an area whose contracted supplies of sawlogs are insufficient. The impact of this is considerable for the region; it will be felt more harshly in the small, integrated communities such as Ahaura or Ikamatua whose patriarchal mills will probably be first to the wall.

Mr Young sought to explain this melancholy turn in affairs by citing three recent factors which have markedly curtailed the sawlog resource. These are:
(1) Wide-scale, quantitative reappraisal of potentially merchantable stands.

(2) The implementation of the new indigenous forest policy.

(3) The proposed reservation of large tracts of lowland forest for scientific reasons.

Meagre knowledge of the magnitude of extractable resources (let alone forest ecology) has long been a feature of indigenous forestry. The National Forest Survey, completed some two decades ago, sought to rectify this problem on a national scale. Facts and figures generated by the survey influenced subsequent attitudes in Forest Service management and general planning objectives. However, because of shortages in appropriately trained staff, the lack of central insistence that local supplies be fully documented, and most of all because of the spectacular growth of exotic plantation forestry, interest in indigenous forests waned; and with priorities altered sound forest planning lapsed. To a certain extent the future deficit in realisable timber volumes is a delayed result of past reluctance to allocate appropriate management resources to indigenous forestry.

The Forest Service's new indigenous forest policy does cause considerable reductions to "take away" sawlog volumes. Previously, a stand's merchantable volume was largely regarded as its removable volume. The purposeful spirit of the new policy, particularly its restraint upon exotic conversion, now means that removable volumes are generally 40 to 50% of previous levels, in some instances as low as 25%. Given that available merchantable volumes were probably estimated optimistically anyway, the overall effect of implementing the policy is pretty drastic. People have commented that much of the new policy is commonsense forest management that should have been applied earlier, or at least allowed for in calculating future available resources. While this may seem reasonable in today's light, many fail to appreciate the mood of yesteryears when an endorsement of *bona fide* production indigenous forestry was an invitation to be recognised as feeble-minded.

Many naturalists, scientists and their associates have come to realise that as a proportion of the original there is little lowland New Zealand as yet unmodified by man. This country's three million people and their society are a direct consequence of this; our standard of living together with our pollution and our environmental science are attributable to the wholesale domestication of bush-clad, primeval New Zealand. Because the change was abrupt, condensed to barely a century; and because the transition, on a local basis, was frequently ill-
conceived and poorly executed, it has become the vogue to superficially regret the change and oppose all further inroads into “virgin” New Zealand — with opposition fading where forestry interests are not involved. From the heart of our urban-dwelling, middle-class intelligentsia an army of biological scientists and environmentalists have emerged to trumpet the call for preservation of undisturbed “lowland ecosystems” as ecological areas.

Demands for such reserves by these people stem largely from their desire to reduce the net forest area milled. This causes entrenchment by forest owners, which is unfortunate as reserves for ecological or scientific purposes do constitute a justifiable land use — their extent is what is debatable. Essentially they provide for research in virtually unmodified forest, which in turn permits scientific evaluation of the efficiency and impact of commercial forest management. One may cynically question the value of such research, as indications are that the public and its political leaders care little about viable indigenous management; and our natural scientists generally oppose native forest utilisation though most can see the reserves as fertile sources of countless Ph.Ds.

Another argument for reserves lies in their role as land use “controls”. Most lowland New Zealand is under intensive commercial use, including exotic forestry. Such land can be contrasted with that in ecological areas to ascertain changes in land conditions, floral and faunal structure, etc. Practically all of the country gets along without these controls, however, especially the highly developed regions most modified by agricultural industries, and presumably the areas where one day they might be of some use. Ironically, the relatively undeveloped West Coast possesses, by its very nature, marvellous opportunities for reserving the extensive lowland forest ecosystems so essential to a region of intensive land-based production — precisely what won’t happen to the area. Regardless of the fact that wide-scale beech forest utilisation is now most unlikely, the pressure still remains for extensive ecological areas. Gazettal of these proposed areas will cause disproportionate and profound reductions to the available sawlog resource.

It is easy to demonstrate 20/20 vision in hindsight but nothing is achieved by elaborating on how this whole sorry state could have been avoided had the Forest Service done this or that. Nevertheless, the broad indigenous forestry saga together with its sharp clashes of interest in local areas, does provide lessons for those in the greater exotic sector. Notably, these are:
Any planning model which assumes the voluntary closure of existing mills is unrealistic, until the available resource is virtually exhausted.

In defining their available long-term resource and their management methods, forestry people must appreciate that in these times they are the least qualified to set the parameters within which to work. Instead, the limits are going to increasingly reflect the whims of an essentially urban public, as moulded by various interest groups.

Because the public and media will be reliably more illogical, more strident and more attentive when involved with defamation instead of praise, it is critical that exotic production forestry prepare itself for an inevitable environmental frisking. Flushed with success from battling the scourge of native forest logging, a score of righteous groups will search the country's plantations. Broadcast application of herbicides, slash and scrub burning, soil disturbance, conifer monocultures, all will undoubtedly be found as concealed weapons — just further examples to disgruntled urbanites of the ingrained contempt forestry feels towards our sacred environment. What is more, at the same time they can indulge in the national pastime of "knocking" government departments.

Forest owners should ensure that, regardless of the uncertainties above, they fully know the status of their forests, especially the basic wood quality content and the distribution by commercial potential.

Within a decade the supply of quality native timbers will have shrunk to a very low level and replacements will need to be found through massive importation and/or New Zealand grown material. Hopefully, forestry will look beyond just exotics in considering the latter and remember our native woods' individuality, their special properties and their renewability. Relatively vigorous beech forests await viable means of less selective utilisation while young podocarps grow among the legacy of old cutovers.

Lastly, it seems that there is something amiss in our system of education. It appears in general to produce natural scientists whose conception of their profession revolves about the detailed study of undisturbed communities that are assumed to be unarguably better than the cultivated ones which sustain us. Natural science teachers largely follow the same trend. While the real results of this have yet to be seriously felt in exotic forestry, they are certain
to occur in the future. Forestry interests would do well to enter the education arena actively and promote a more pragmatic approach to man, science and the environment.

Throughout the country recent decades have seen an acceleration of the trend to centralise, centralise and centralise. Small groceries are bought out by nation-wide distribution firms; small sawmills are taken over by marketing/utilisation combines; the very population itself coagulates into urban centres that further encourage the process. Timber milling, particularly indigenous milling, resisted the trend for many years, and, when it came to the West Coast, mills bought by outside interests somehow managed to retain their individuality while still yielding sustenance to their communities. The next few years should see the end of the smaller of these mills and a general decline in others. They are part of a social web fast fading in New Zealand; a sociologist's control with which to compare present society which few have the wisdom to protect from extinction. When the first mills close the resultant hardships won't be topical enough to attract newspaper features, big city saprophytes won't form "action councils" over the issue, the region itself won't collapse, but inexorably its strength is further weakened and its character diminished.