The Plantation Effect (G. Rosoman, Greenpeace) – An essay in monocultural thinking

Mr Rosoman’s brief essay on when you last beat your wife, indeed enough wives, concubines and catamites to please Solomon in all his glory, will have worried many of those foresters who have read it or the potted version in the February 1995 issue of New Zealand Forestry. Should we be flattered by being added to whaling, the fur trade, nuclear weapons and nuclear wastes as scourges of the planet? Are we happy to know that our doings will be oversimplified, misrepresented and exaggerated by a body that seems to have decided that a free shot at trees is the key to its survival?

This small publication (48 p) has set a lot of people scratching their heads and caused some indignation too, which is a pity as it covers ground where there are things to discuss and things to improve, if only they could be detected in the emotional fog. But the presentation is so poor and so liable to misinterpretation that few foresters will read it, and any influence it has is likely to be negative, and restricted to the converted.

"The Plantation Effect" reads as if it has been put together from the uncritically gathered droppings of some electronic machine primed with negative keywords and sent to roam the internet. As far as space allows, it is all there like a sheet of pastry, flat and featureless, devoid of any sense of direction in the evolution of ideas or practice, no sense of time. The reader, sinking in a sea of references, cannot tell the difference between practice long since abandoned, what is done now, and what possibly might (always for the worse) be done in the future.

There is a liberal use of scarewords such as 'organochlorines' and 'heavy metals' in plantation establishment without any definition of substances so that, if there is cause, their use might be avoided, and a skull and crossbones over PCP is casually used with the moral high ground".

Greenpeace is not alone in its resentment of an assumed pretension to sustainability. Forest and Bird (Nov. 1994) carried an article slating Maoridom for claiming that the harvest of muttonbird and native pigeons is sustainable. Again it was the claim of sustainability which had got up the high priest’s nose, but curiously, the next article, lauding a pakeha conservation worthy, pictured that person kneeling on an exotic pasture unrolling fencing wire, with not a habitat in sight.

The first Forest and Bird article also contained a somewhat surprising snide reference (in context it was not complimentary) to foresters “obsessed with sustainable harvest”.

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Later on, apparently, the author of The Plantation Effect claimed that he had used journalist’s licence to attract attention. In this he has been successful as he is to speak at the next AGM of the Institute and is on the platform of a joint NZIF/Commonwealth Forestry Association seminar (Auckland, February) to discuss greening of the New Zealand forest industry.

The problem for the forester is how to take all this. We do not feel particularly guilty to be planting trees, and on any scale of comparison with other branches of agriculture our practice is conservative: the use of agrochemicals, either fertilisers or herbicides and pesticides, is small in comparison with horticulture or dairying, we are green, green, green, whether Mr Rosoman likes it or not.

Clearly he does not like it, so why? If his interest is in land use, forestry is not the obvious place to start, because the excesses there are that much the less. If he is interested in its industry, then again there is no particular priority for forest-based industry as opposed to agricultural industry, and we do not hear a cry for the abolition of sheep because freezing works do bad things to the environment as well as to the sheep.

So is there another axe to grind? There are two possibilities, one of which, perhaps surprisingly, is of sustainability – of Greenpeace.

Greenpeace is not a democracy – you pay a sub and take what you get on trust. There are no local sections, no voting, and support is measured by the money that flows in for the issue of the day, which means of course that only ‘popular’ issues receive attention. While the aura of being a body run on a shoestring by dedicated people, the impression given when the fleet was thrown away at Mururoa was rather different.

Corporate voices in well-tailored accents explained how a dismissal was not really a dismissal, but sideways promotion. There was talk of downsizing, management priorities and market share, of the role of head office and the need for national offices to justify their existence. Suddenly we were in the realm of the multinational corporation, making decisions, setting priorities in secret in an effort to carve out its niche in a competitive marketplace. So is forestry now Greenpeace’s Campaign ‘96? If so, expect economy with the truth, demonisation, and a general mud flinging, since only if enough people are scared will the money flow in and Rosoman et al. be saved from being downsized.

The second alternative is simply cultural confusion. We are a pastoral people, and if we were not (like for instance the Japanese) we would have a great deal more forested land, probably natural forest, and a much more diffuse forest ownership. As it is, as a nation we have usually seen trees as a hindrance rather than as a part of economic land use. That is changing, but the belief hangs on, of forests as someone else’s business, native forests now inviolable for sabbatarian use apart from daily life, but otherwise … an economy of trees? No, no, how vulgar. A few round the house distinguish the gent from the peasant, but otherwise the new diversity is ostriches, llamas, coloured sheep and vineyards.

So forestry, here as in Britain (whence much of our culture is drawn), is a thing apart. Someone else (the State, big companies) does it, or, in Britain, they import. The difference is that in New Zealand we are progressing on from pastoral agriculture towards a very much more organic
dependence on trees, whilst in Britain the absolution from responsibility given by easy access to the world’s timber markets has made that country, without repentance, one of the largest consumers of imported wood in the world, on a per capita basis exceeding the Japanese.

The confusion of course is subconscious. I doubt if Forest and Bird’s editor noticed the incongruity of the two articles mentioned earlier – probably a pakeha, the pakeha view of things was simply seen to be right, while the maori was there to be put right. Not so much racism as a missionary wanting to get out.

One of John Buchan’s heroes, a Scottish laird in (I think) “Greenmantle”, shakes his head over the devious forested hills of central Europe, in which by intimidation hide devious people, and compares them unfavourably with the honest naked hills of home.

Simon Jenkins, correspondent of The Times of London and a resident of a naked Wales, compared his attitude to foxhunting with his opinions on afforestation and child abuse (The Times, Oct. 23, 1993). He approves of none of them.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the UK equivalent to Forest and Bird, but politically much more powerful), in its discussion paper “Forests for the Future” (1991) dismisses any claim that domestic afforestation will protect other peoples’ forests, on the grounds that only a small part of UK imports comes from the tropics. The majority is from temperate forest, much of it unmanaged, but apparently of no environmental value.

So the old cultural devil keeps cropping up, and the problem for foresters is how much of him lives in Mr Rosoman, and how much is the product of an easy target. Much more popular and easy to scapegoat than other forms of land use, forestry is blamed because it might do things that others do, unremarked, already.

It is not a question of ‘blaming’ agriculture, because we are all part of the economic land-use spectrum, but of asking Greenpeace to explain its priorities. There is unlikely to be an answer of course, because explanation is not their way – does the prophet explain to the people? Of course not – he expounds with flashing eye and thunderous voice and we ignore him at our peril.

So if Greenpeace has chosen forestry as its cash cow for 1996, we are in for a rough ride, but forestry has been derided before, for most of its existence indeed, and if we had taken all the advice we have been given, would there now be any forests at all? Probably not.

Maybe Mr Rosoman will enlighten us. We will see.

John Purey-Cust

A Forest Minister for every season

And you think your job is challenging. In only ten months as General Manager of the Papua New Guinea National Forest Service I have served four Ministers for Forests and one Vice Minister – the latter not being a play on words but rather a creative interpretation of “pork barrelling”.

Papua New Guinea is a little on the wild side. From a low point in the late 1980s when forestry was acknowledged to be “out of control”, the sector has climbed to the dizzy heights of being held as a model for institutional and policy reform. A fresh new Forest Authority, with a Board and a unified National Forest Service, has replaced the tired and ineffectual national department and 19 provincial forestry divisions. New policies are in place, procedures refined, and a new Act built upon a foundation of sustainable development, value added, participatory management and equity sharing.

But the bubble has burst. We are now facing a backlash against the reformation which, with hindsight, would seem to have been pursued with a little too much enthusiasm – a case of the forest being loved to death. While donors, development agencies, the concerned public, and environmental groups continue to rejoice at all the checks and balances, most Papua New Guineans are livid. They see forests as their window for leaving the stone age and moving right into education, health clinics and the shop window. They know that timber is now worth real money and do not appreciate being told to keep their hands in their pockets.

These are customary resource owners – they are losing patience, and with some justification. Only one new timber permit has been issued in the past three years, and even that is now being crucified by outsiders who have gained locus through the new transparency and participatory approach.

In seeking to regain lost opportunities, village big-men, local, and national leaders have joined hands in resisting the Forestry Act, which they have come to see

Keith Dolman hands over a community forestry project to Paramount Chief of Trobriand Islands.