The importance of being registered

David Field

Oscar Wilde was a bit of a hard case, a distinguished classics scholar and later a successful writer, well known for works such as “The Importance of Being Earnest”. He led a tempestuous life as he followed his dramatic instincts and ultimately ended up in jail where he wrote an apology for his life! In retrospect he might have been more successful if there had been a Professional Writers Guild to provide literary and guidance. Who knows?

In the past, New Zealand foresters also enjoyed a fairly unbridled existence, not having to formally account for their professional work, either to peers or the public. That situation began to change in the 1960s when the first forestry consultants were recognised. John Groome was one of those pioneers and noted in the November 1996 New Zealand Forestry some of the important features and virtues of professional recognition. He suggested that the State had always been regarded as the principal provider of forestry advice until the NZ Forest Service was disestablished in 1987. The “freemarket” for forestry which followed saw much more interest in recognition of professional consultants, and an even greater need to develop and maintain high standards of expertise, practice, accountability and service to clients and the public.

John noted two particular aspects of future forestry consultant recognition which could help sharpen participant’s focus and encourage them to develop their individual capability. Those aspects were;

• the need for the registration process to subject aspiring consultants to peer review; and,
• to allow only individuals, (not companies) to be recognised.

The recognition/registration of forestry consultants has increased markedly since 1990 and the NZIF now has more than 90 registered forestry consultants.

In 1996 the membership registration process was substantially revised to bring it more into line with the registration processes of other professional organisations. This process initially embraced the existing recognised consultants, but also provided a formal registration process for new consultant applicants, and permitted any Full Members to become registered. The revised procedure is described in the August 1997 New Zealand Forestry.

More recently, former Chairman of the Registration Board, and now Associate Professor of Forestry at Canterbury University, Dr Bruce Manley commented:

“Over the last 10 years, I have been a strong supporter of the NZIF as it has sought to develop and promote professional standards in New Zealand forestry. I saw the development of a registration scheme to which all Full Members of the NZIF could apply, not just consultants, as a step forward in the advancement of forestry professionals in New Zealand.

Adoption of the registration model by the NZIF moved it closer to the standards set by overseas forestry professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Foresters in the United Kingdom and the Association of British Columbia Professional Foresters. It also moved the NZIF towards other professional bodies in New Zealand such as the NZ Institute of Valuers and the Institute of Professional Engineers.

I applied to become a Registered Member of the NZIF not just to support a process that I had helped establish but also because I believed that it had personal benefit to me. Knowing that a panel of my peers consider that I have the qualifications, skills, experience and level of professionalism necessary to be granted registration has value for me.

In my new role as Associate Professor at the New Zealand School of Forestry, I have become an educator of forestry professionals of the future. In encouraging students to develop a professional approach and values, I consider it important that I am a Registered Member of the NZIF – evidence that I have been recognised by my peers as having “professional knowledge and skills, high standards of professional conduct, and commitment to ongoing learning.”

The essence of the NZIF registration scheme for consultants and other members is that it helps to raise and maintain the standards of professional forestry in New Zealand. This is important if foresters wish to enhance their professional reputation, and achieve levels of professional rigour and public acceptance similar to others (eg Valuers, Engineers, Accountants).

It is worth reiterating the characteristics of a professional person as identified by A J Sutherland in his presentation to the NZIF conference of 1995. He noted four characteristics required by a professional:

• Competence
  - the product of proper education, training and continuing professional development

• Responsibility
  - personal accountability for decisions and actions

• Ethical standards
  - imposed through a code of ethics

• Service
  - to clients and the public through responsible application of knowledge and skills

Sutherland said that the roles of a professional Institute were:

• Gatekeeping
  - to prescribe, determine and accredit qualifications for membership of the institution

• Maintaining Standards
  - to enhance the practice of the profession
Facilitating information transfer
- to obtain and share information and knowledge about the profession and related professions

Providing member services

Promoting the profession

The NZIF Registration Board has been working for three years under its revised structure. In that time it has developed criteria and processes for members applications, entry, review and discipline; it has introduced standards for continuing professional development and for forest valuations; and it has produced a substantial Professional Handbook.

Having achieved some of the necessary capability as the registration processes administering body, the Board now wishes to improve its services to existing registered members, and promote the virtues of professional registration to other NZIF members, to related professions and to the public at large. A recent survey conducted for the Registration Board of all those registered since the revised process was put in place three years ago, has confirmed that the registration process has been handled professionally and effectively. It is apparent however that the personal advantages of registration are not fully apparent to some of the surveyed registered members, and not widely appreciated by the public. Nevertheless those surveyed had considerable support for the system and would encourage other forestry colleagues to become registered.

So, what is the importance of being registered?

As the forest estate grows in area and volume to be harvested, the need for capable forestry advice and those able to provide it, will increase. In the international forestry arena it will be important for the advisors and their clients to share the same high standards and expectations of the professional advice given and received.

Under the provisions of the NZIF registered member process individual clients and the public at large can expect and will receive the best possible forestry advice. They will know that educational qualifications, experience and standards of competence and ethical behaviour are as high as they can be. They should also be aware that in the event of any professional incompetence or ill-discipline they can resolve the difficulty directly and in a professional manner, or have the matter reviewed by the registered member’s peers, particularly through the Registration Board.

Equally the Registered Consultants and Members should be able to expect appropriate service, support, encouragement and counselling from the Institute.

Many Registered Consultants and Members already realise that as the forestry profession matures and becomes more focused in its servicing role, its professionally recognised advisors have far greater credibility and weight if they are aligned to a professional body which provides regular peer review, sets standards and monitors members performance. Growing public awareness of the protection afforded them through the registration process should ensure more demand of consultants who are registered members of NZIF.

Other professional bodies and individuals are aware of and recognise the status of registered forestry consultants, and are more inclined to work with those registered through a formal process. Similarly, employers are starting to see the benefits of having registered forestry capability in their team. Company credibility is likely to be improved as personnel lift their professional status, continue their professional development and accept regular peer review.

A campaign to promote the virtues and advantages of Registered Forestry Consultants and Registered Members to the public at large, to other professional groups and to employers is about to begin. The Registration Board will also encourage NZIF members to seek registration for their own good.

Unlike Oscar Wilde, forestry professionals should not leave issues of importance like status and credibility till the end of their working lives. They should earnestly seek registration now!