More to sustainable forestry than just management

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The Meaning Of Forestry


"Forestry is the art and science of managing forests so as to secure a wide range of environmental and socio-economic benefits."

Acceptance of this definition means that forestry is a long-term, usually a very long-term, land use and mainly because of this, trained staff are required to manage the forest and to sell its produce. Where there are large forests or accumulations of forest in a region, that region's social aspects need to be developed because of employment, transport, other local economic structures and questions of public use of the forest itself. Above all, because of the usual long life of trees and perpetual life of forest, stable Government Forest policies are essential. This means provision of an effective mechanisation (buffer) between established forest policies and changes sought by short-term Governments. A comprehensive forestry policy must also take into account the needs of related or dependent organisations (e.g. wood users, importers and exporters).

Disconcerting happenings in the New Zealand forestry world during the past almost two decades have been such as to make it abundantly clear that the country needs a comprehensive and stable forest policy; one that will, in particular, weather changes in Governments. The NZIF has commenced this process. Combinations with users of forestry organisations are needed. We began to reach this stage when the Forestry Development Council was formed back in the 1970s.

Sustainable Forest Management in New Zealand

Analysis of extensive evidence, much of it recorded in detail in books, brings out clearly, that the obliteration of the New Zealand Forest Service in 1989 and the manner in which the sale of cutting rights in plantation State Forests then took place, deprived the country of sound forestry structures and resources that could have yielded continuing advantages in land development and use, wood supplies and industry, regional development, protection forest effectiveness, and many related matters. Such basic changes could only have been finally organised and pursued through political channels, no matter what other forces were at work. Indeed, in this great change, the political forces and maneuvering were clear and have been recorded.

The handful of people who organised and brought them about constituted a cabal of politicians, business people and civil servants; people with remote connections, but with seemingly similar philosophies about wealth and its power. Surprisingly, they discovered in the Mont Pelerin Society of Europe an organisation based on such philosophies that helped, although to a quite minor extent, to get a few of them together to express their beliefs. A surprising and most convenient analysis of the joint activities of the New Zealand cabal plus a few others was made by Australians in The New Citizen Press (Jan, Feb, Mar. 1997). It is a startling account entitled, "Nazi 'reforms' rip New Zealand - Australia next." It includes photographs of the people involved and, although sometimes exaggerated, the account is correct in detail.

The political foray leading to the amazingly rapid changes that affected forestry were introduced by Roger Douglas (later Sir Roger), Minister of Finance in the Labour Government elected in 1983. As far as the Forest Service was concerned the story has been well told by Birchfield and Grant in their 1993 book, Out of the Woods, in the compilation of which the authors state they had access to, "...all relevant governmental, Treasury and Corporation documents and correspondence" - a rare occurrence in New Zealand.

The newly elected Labour Government in 1983 certainly inherited very difficult political and financial positions. Far-reaching, strong measures were required to bring the country back to better government and an improved financial position. On the other hand there was much stored up wealth in organisations such as electricity generation and distribution, and railways. Plantation State Forests had been experimented with over a considerable period and then expanded into a substantial forest area throughout the country. This was ready for large sales based on substantial management that would bring employment and regional development.

Roger Douglas, in his key position, took a "whirlwind" approach to unlocking this wealth for what he considered were the, "needs of the country." He spelt out this approach later in 1989 in an address to the Pacific Regional Meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in Christchurch on 28 November 1989. In this address are such statements as, "Political survival depends on making quality decisions," or "compromised policies lead to voter dissatisfaction." He also
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Apart from the accusations that the Forest Service never paid its way because it sold logs so cheaply from forest cleared to make way for farmland, changes to 3-year Government terms prevented completely the sustained management of any Crown native forest. Yet Governments voted and spent substantial amounts of money on extensive research into possible management and Forest Service developed specialist research officers and research stations.

This has happened to kauri forest, a forest that can be readily managed to produce valuable wood. Remaining areas are now all tightly closed with not a square metre even as an example. Conservationists and votes! Westland rimu forest - a wonderful stretch of uneven-aged rimu forest growing on glacial terrace, non-agriculture soils, stretching almost from Westport to the glaciers and readily capable of sustained management, has almost completely gone leaving only bogs behind. Plans were once set out for their management.

The weirdest circus of all is being performed around New Zealand's southern beech forest. Sixty years ago the ecologist Leonard Cockayne, one of the world founders of the science, wrote to the effect that the country possessed a source of great future wealth in managed beech forest. Fifty years ago Governments voted to experiment in the sustained management of beech forest. It proved to be simple using the unique seeding habit of the tree. Every four years or so, beech has a remarkably heavy flowering and seeding. Use can be made of this concentration by preparing areas to receive it so that seed can readily germinate and grow. The regenerated crop is then treated throughout its life to produce commercial thinnings and a final crop of mature logs. Prospects of very large-scale beech management producing substantial quantities of wood were there. Enter Conservationists, short-term politicians, and people who live in cities. So now we have the devils brew, constantly changing plans and no management, except for private owners of a 'bit of beech forest' not cleared for farming who get on with the job.

In the not very distant future the Crown-owned

Development of State Forestry in New Zealand

One special reason for the setting up of the Forest Service in 1919 was to introduce 'law and order' into the clearing of native forest from crown-owned, potential farmland and the measuring, and selling of logs from such clearing. This was done, but then throughout the Forest Service's whole existence the prices of these logs were, with the exception of kauri, fixed by politicians at low to very low rates, and when sawn, the price of sawn-timber was also often fixed by politicians at low rates. The reason at first given for this being the need for cheap housing.

As native timber supplies dwindled, disparity between these low prices and what should have been much higher values became matters of severe criticism. Surprisingly, few people were aware of this and those who did speak about it always blamed the Forest Service. Even the Auditor-General at one stage joined the attack but when he was told about the political background he was most apologetic.

Questioning about this matter and related stumpages usually contained the accusation that, "The Forest Service doesn't pay its way; why sell the lovely native logs so cheaply?"

Richard Prebble, who became Associate Minister of Finance at the same time as Roger Douglas became Minister of Finance, joined the accusers in word and writing. This accusation was also frequently taken up by the conservation movement as the cutting of native forest was coming close to an end. Politicians, of course, became most interested and even began to cultivate this anxiety because they found that they could manipulate votes by doing so.

The Forest Service 'copped' it all ways just because it had been given the task of measuring and getting some money for logs which in pre-Service days often found their way into mills free of any charges at all.

An outline of the State forestry developments follows. It is given here because the set up in existence at the beginning of the period was changed utterly and with great rapidity. What was widely regarded as a sound, and well-trained service with wide ramifications was changed virtually overnight through an organisation, Parliament, that normally considers matters at length and its debates are public. Moreover, the need for detailed consideration when making radical changes in forestry is made clear when we remember that forestry, one way or another, affects all our lives. It might be through the obvious things like wood products and buildings or land use. It might also be through scenery or the regulation of streams and rivers flowing through protection forest, or the security of soils.

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In the not very distant future the Crown-owned
beech forest at lower elevations will be in danger of liquidation. As fossils fuels around the world run low - and that time is not far distant, some short-term Government will turn to these forests. There will be no time to introduce management - it will be urgent clear-falling. One can hear in the imagination, plaintive calls from cities, accompanied by threats about votes, if some of that wood cannot be used for power. It would be as well to start sustained yield management now. It is a simple and proven operation.

While this changing world was taking place, the Forest Service was getting on with its other main task - the establishment of plantations to grow wood needed by the time the main yields from native forest clearing came to an end. This was a major occupation involving the introduction of forest trees, nursery growing of seedlings for planting, seeing and acquiring land, planting, growing, tending stands, and wide research into all forestry phases. Politicians took a close and understanding interest and part in all this work. When the Forest Service's annual estimates were being discussed in Parliament, members would sometimes ask why planting could not be carried out in certain parts of 'their country'. Perhaps they had mills running out of native forest logs, or 'bush' cleared for farmland that was eroding, or they wanted roading improved and 'new' industry in the future.

Conferences were held. Politicians, farmers, businessmen and others attended. Research was greatly expanded, as was broadly-based staff training. A major conference was held in 1969 and this produced a recommendation for the setting up of a Forestry Development Council to advise the Minister of Forests. Gradually, a good pattern of plantations throughout the country was developed. General support was given by politicians. Subsides, for what came to be known as 'farm forestry', were agreed to by politicians and 'farm forestry' developed strongly.

The time came in the 1980s when major preparations were needed to exploit the oldest plantations. The earliest planted, including in particular the great Kaingaroa Forest, were already yielding substantial quantities of wood that was being utilised in small parcels. The Tasman Sale from Kaingaroa in the early 1950s was unfortunately conducted and concluded in such a way that it had severe subsequent, detrimental effects on plantation forestry, and the Forest Service itself. It was not possible to separate in the minds of Treasury and related organizations, plus the potential buyers (who were accepted before the sale!), the need for the forest to 'pay its way' as well as the business drawing supplies from it. They were used to cheap, native wood! The Sale Document was concocted in such a way that it amounted to an ever increasing subsidy to the industry and a burden on the tax-payer.

So here was a major, very substantial basis for the catch-cry used by those who found it convenient to loudly cry, “The Forest Service never paid its way”. This led eventually to ‘inquiries into Forest Service management’, political juggling of various sorts, intensifying opposition from Conservationists to the disappearance of the last of the ‘commercial’ native forest, and louder cries from various quarters that; “The Forest Service never paid its way.”

Eventually, in all the midst of all this turmoil and negotiating for votes, the Forest Service was disestablished in March 1987. A forestry corporation was set up, and in 1989 a major sale of cutting rights, labelled “Sale of State Owned Forests in New Zealand, was advertised by the Forestry Corporation Ltd. The Sale Prospectus lists every planted State Forest, 83 in all, and 554,214 hectares in extent. It contains the statement; “Buyers will have complete flexibility in planning the harvesting and utilisation of wood.”

What a wonderful invitation to lead to destruction.

The sale process took no account of almost a century of political effort and taxpayer investment in plantation forestry, much of it for improving land use and providing for future industry, as well as providing returns to the taxpayer. All the ‘quality people’ could, or wanted to, see were resources containing a store of immediate wealth. That immediate wealth must be released. Cutting rights sales for at least a rotation of trees and made mainly to overseas investors would do the trick.

The complete process, including the manner in which the disestablishment of the Forest Service was carried out, was in my judgment, political trickery. The following account comes from A. Familton, a senior forest officer involved at the time in this disestablishment.

“While the “behind the scenes” political intent to privatise the nation's public forest estate was being cemented, senior officials of the Forest Service were kept totally misinformed of Government intentions. These Cabinet Ministers hell bent on “restructuring” the public sector made sure that there would be no opposition to plans to disestablish land management Departments.”

“The Forest Service at the request of the Minister of Forests spent many hours of senior staff effort on a “rationalisation” of administration of Crown Land and State Forest Land. The fact that no discussion ever took place with Government Ministers on the recommendations of the Cabinet papers supports the view they were a deliberate
tactic to divert staff attention from the secret Government intention.”
(Personal communication A. Hamilton)

The First Century (the 1900s) of New Zealand Forestry
So, the first century of State forestry in New Zealand could be recorded briefly as follows.

Human settlement of New Zealand has seen an extensive forest cover, containing a superb natural wood resource, replaced by farming and the establishment of wool-yielding plantations, both large and small, to replace the natural wood utilisation. Being a mountainous country, we have as well, substantial remains of mountain forest and mountain top vegetation. Most of this is vegetation essential for the protection of soil and water. In moulding this land-use we have passed by the opportunities to convert kauri forest to sustained yield management of one of the most versatile woods in the world.

We have deliberately destroyed the Westland Coast stretch of readily manageable rimu forest growing on non-agricultural soil. We have quarreled over the use of part of the extensive southern beech forest for sustained wood production.

We have uncovered from protective vegetation large areas of unstable geological formations. We have jeopardised the protective values of the mountain vegetation by the introduction of damaging wild animals. Above all, we have jeopardised the long-term safety and sustained wood production of the State’s remarkable series of plantation forests.

How and why has this wastefulness occurred?

Changing, short-term, 3-year voting politics deciding long-term forestry issues have been the main cause. We must of course have this short-term mechanism for every-day living, but votes being sought for this often run counter to long-term developments. They certainly change approaches, sometimes radically, during the life span of a single tree let alone the permanent life of a sustained-yield forest.

Paradoxically, short-term politics paid for a great deal of forest research and investigation for permanent management of kauri, rimu, beech and other native trees, but then ignored, or even deliberately destroyed, the application of results. Short-term politics also paid for or supported extensive plantation establishment throughout the land, but then in the recent selling of State Forest cutting-rights ignored the long-term requirement of the land, and safety and productivity of the plantations themselves.

The greatest change based on short-term political seeking of votes for power, led to the summary, or as one commentator expressed it, “brutal”, demolition of the New Zealand Forest Service, built soundly over a century and the nation’s sheet-anchor of forestry development as a national need.

Nevertheless, because of the remarkable potential this country has for the development of forestry and its wood production, and in spite of these reversals and omissions, any Government would be wise to examine and analyse what the future might or could hold.

Above all it needs to find some method of buffering long-term developments against short-term, irrational changes.

A Guide to Forestry Investment in Australia and New Zealand
A comprehensive review of the investment opportunities, and risks, in the expanding plantation forestry sector of Australia and New Zealand.

Contents include:

- Management structures
- Forest Resources
- Management Practices
- Wood Production
- Processing Outlets
- Financial Performance
- Investment Opportunities
- Investment Risks

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