Random thoughts and economic realities

Piers Maclaren

The native bush refreshes the soul, in a way that plantations cannot. There is no apparent order in Nature: no straight lines, right angles or obvious geometric shapes. Indeed, on the rare occasions that Nature dabbles in geometry - Moeraki boulders or Giant’s Causeway - the formations are conspicuous. Pile five stones together in a cairn and the human influence is clearly visible in the midst of a boulder field. True, there are many hidden patterns in topography, in the formation of foliage, and in the distribution of species, but they are complex and require specialists to uncover them. Walking through bush is like listening to “white noise”: it soothes.

In contrast to Nature, human beings just cannot behave randomly. If you told a pianist to play the keys at random, a listener in the next-door room would soon distinguish the real human from the robot using random numbers. If you asked a human child to place coloured beads on a table, one by one, in such a way that there was no pattern, you could easily tell the human effort from accidentally split beads. In deliberately trying to avoid a pattern, the child would unwittingly create another one. Cluster analysis would soon unveil the mind behind the human creation.

Part of the public opposition to radiata pine plantations in New Zealand is that they are “boring”. They have little of the complexity and chaos of a natural forest. They are a single species, in large blocks of similar age, and planted in relatively straight lines. They hold few surprises. The prospect of another three or four million hectares of this stuff appeals a lot of people. The nation may need more trees for erosion control, for water quality, for carbon sequestration, but surely to goodness we don’t need more radiata pine?

The problem is that modern industry requires a standardised feedstock. Even with computer technology, machines need uniform and predictable raw materials. In fact, industry can use just about any resource (iron or silica sands, Fiordland water, limestone) just so long as it is both plentiful and consistent in quality.

To steal an idea from Wink Sutton, the world is zeroing in on half-a-dozen commercial plantation timber species. Cloning is the next stage of homogenisation of the resource. Radiata pine will soon follow the path of potatoes, apples and grapes. And why do we prune trees? The market doesn’t need clearwood in six metre lengths. But it is cost-effective to process knot-free wood, even if the end product is chopsticks, at 50,000 pairs per cubic metre. The ideal tree, if biology allowed, would be gun-barrel straight with a square cross-section, the same small-end diameter as large end, no trend in qualities from pith to bark, no growth rings and - indeed - no branches. A technologist’s delight but a woodworker or landscape architect’s horror.

Which gets me to Diane Lucas’s book, handed out to all participants in this year’s national Farm Forestry conference. As a leading landscape architect, she recommends that we: ensure naturalism in our landscapes; avoid geometric shapes; don’t automatically follow fencelines; avoid monocultures; favour hardwoods, and especially natives; selectively log; blend species in a subtle way; vary the tree spacing and pruning schedules; and so forth. She is not a harmless crank who could, and should, be ignored. Her ideas have a wide following and have seriously impacted on farmers in the North Canterbury region and perhaps elsewhere. Unfortunately, the Resource Management Act does not stick to quantifiable effects, like water quality, but includes subjective matters such as aesthetics.

Anyone who has struggled with post-hole borers and fencing strainers, the difficulties of keeping stock from young (broadleaved!) trees, or harvesting plans for raggedy, mixed-species woodlots, understands the impracticalities of most of Diane’s suggestions. Anyone who knows why trees are grown at certain standard spacings or are pruned to certain prescribed heights can comprehend the opportunity costs of her ideas. People who make their living from the sale of tangible agricultural or forestry products, rather than from the promulgation of abstract ideas, know full well the sacrifice involved. I am reminded of Kipling’s poem:

The toad beneath the harrow knows
Exactly where each tooth-point goes.
The butterfly upon the road
Preaches contentment to the toad.

I don’t have the answer to this conundrum: on the one hand, even though I am a radiata pine enthusiast, I don’t have unbridled joy at the prospect of 5 million hectares of plantation forests, in their serried ranks, ordered and structured. On the other hand, Diane Lucas’ profit-sapping suggestions are not the way to go. Like the child with the beads, she can never totally erase the mark of a structured mind. The beauty in much-loved houses, villages, and countrysides around the world has emerged as a by-product of the most appropriate economic solution for the circumstance, not by a Disney-like attempt to create a natural effect.

There is no doubt that much of our native forest should never have been cleared. Many of our steeper, bonier hillides have never contributed much to the national economy, and now pose a threat to our environmental well being. Parts are regenerating nicely without our help, but parts have an uncertain future. Our hills are mostly privately owned, and their use will be determined by thousands of independent decision-makers. Profitability will inevitably be paramount. And profitability demands the creation of a boring, homogeneous resource. Welcome, Brave New World....

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