Plantations are forests

Sir,

Grant Rosoman questions whether plantations are forests (February 2003). The question that should be asked is whether they are good forests, and if not, what would make them good forests, and what should we do to make them so?

The tenor of his question possibly lays in Greenpeace’s chief interest, in stopping things – for instance whaling, nuclear, baby seals and now GE – of which it disapproves. Encouraging improvement is a new art as yet mastered only hesitantly. So it is natural perhaps that Grant should write as he does, hovering uncertainly first on this side of the fence, then on that, fearful to create a precedent by actually backing something.

He is Greenpeace’s Forest Campaigner in New Zealand, a paid official whose terms of reference we do not know. Some understanding of what they might be was recently given by Denis Hocking in the May issue of NZ Forest Industries, where he quotes from their paper to the recent UNFF Meeting on Planted Forests held in Wellington in March - “Greenpeace doesn’t like plantations. We have learnt to live with them for strategic advantage. We disagree with calling them planted forests because they are not forests”.

Denis hints that a part of the global problem is a dislike of short rotation pulpwod plantations, mostly tropical and sub-tropical and on land cleared of natural forest. There is apparently no mention of longer-lived plantations of the kind that predominate here. The issue in the tropics is, of course, further confused by the overlap of short rotation forestry crops and longer-lived agricultural tree crops such as rubber and oil palm. Where do you draw the line? Some might argue scale until they drive for hours through the massive agricultural plantations of Malaysia and Indonesia – this is no peasant agriculture.

Perhaps we should define an ‘agricultural plantation tree crop’ as one where agrichemicals and fertilisers are heavily relied on, whilst a ‘forest plantation’ is one where they are not?

So I think it’s up to Grant to define exactly how broad is the forest plantation spectrum that Greenpeace abominates. Does it start and finish with pulpwood plantations, or does it also go on to include radiata pine with a 30 year rotation, or Douglas fir at 50 years? How would the oak plantations in central France that I visited as a student stand, well into their second 300+ year rotation? Because plantations they all are, though the sophistication of their management systems may vary greatly.

Are any of them acceptable to Greenpeace? If any are, then Greenpeace does accept forest plantations, and we have something we can talk about, and something where, with due allowance for the different requirements of different species, we may find common ground and a common direction. If they are not, then we are indeed in a McWorld where regional environmental and cultural differences are unimportant. As the puritan says, sin is sin, and everything we do bears the curse of old Adam. There is only one problem and only one solution.

But the Forest Stewardship Council’s (FSC) certification system for forests (including plantations) doesn’t say that, as it is a system focused on continual improvement. Greenpeace is a founder member of the FSC, so we may hopefully take from that that actually they are not entirely against all plantations, and that we may, in the religious sense, be capable of being saved.

So it would have been good to see Grant at the recent NZ Farm Forestry Association and NZ Institute of Forestry conferences. Certification and how planted forests should be managed were much discussed at both and one included a visit to the first FSC certified plantation forest in New Zealand, now well down the track to chemical-free management.

What does no good is the continual harping on about the bad old days and ‘decades of failed experiments’. That was a part of the New Zealand colonial experience (and we are all recent arrivals, lacking ancient wisdoms), and one that Grant, who I understand grew up on a dairy farm, shares with every forester. I would not even attempt to compare the virtue of failed experiments with the agricultural blitzkrieg that solved the problem by throwing biodiversity out the window, and keeping it there. Given Greenpeace’s concerns there we may very well be close to a time when it is safer to eat radiata pine than bread or dairy products.

Nor do we want to hear more about accords. A 19th century Maori would nod familiarly at Pete Hodgson’s comment on the West Coast Accord when he killed it, that ‘it had served its purpose’, and we have still to hear Forest and Bird acknowledge that their ‘celebrated’ NZ Forest Accord permits sustainable harvest from natural forest, even though that is one of only three clauses in it.

So Foresters are wary of Environmentalists as people who give no credit and do not keep their word, people who see only the demons that dwell in planted forests but never ever visit them. There is a tinge of that in Grant’s illustrations, where he shows his ideal landscape (Fig. 2) of monocultural farming in a bosky setting, which will certainly help to protect the streams from agrochemical run off and add some biodiversity (but not to the crops themselves) and amenity. But what it is not about is wood. In Grant’s mind, as in others, it seems that that must still come from Fig. 1, from Indonesia, Africa, South America, indeed anywhere else but here.

As for the future, we still have much to learn. That will always be so, and it is a point that Grant needs to remember applies to us all, not just to foresters. ‘Unforested’ or not, New Zealand’s plantations are already being used as the foundation for our Kyoto case as well as providing the most environmentally benign of our industrial land uses. They will also in due course become major energy providers themselves as the big
fibre users wither away in the face of rising energy costs. Above all, perhaps, they give us an environmentally benign raw material, streets ahead of metals and concrete. They can be better managed. They will be better managed, in all senses of the word, but is it to anyone’s advantage if they go away?

There is hope. Grant draws attention to John Wardle’s innovative forest management, in both natural and plantation forest, so in a first tiny way he acknowledges that forestry in both dimensions exists. But he still needs to decide which side of the fence he sits on. If it is on the side of forests and wood, he needs to sit down for a month and think about New Zealand solutions, to get

plantsations to become more like forests is inevitable. Can we call woodlots that won’t be replanted or 1000 ha radiata pine clearcut a forest? I would say clearly no. Social and environmental concerns over short rotation plantations in the tropics are certainly another dimension again on New Zealand. However, the New Zealand Government is at the forefront internationally in promoting the expansion of plantations without taking care to distinguish good from bad, and also simply to find an easy way out for New Zealand in meeting Kyoto requirements and avoiding fossil fuel use reduction.

I won’t respond here to John’s many inaccuracies and presumptions about Greenpeace and me personally, other to say that I’m visiting plantations and forests frequently, both in New Zealand and elsewhere. I’m a tree grower myself, and have been a supporter of John Wardle’s restoration forestry for 10 years. What intrigues me is with the widespread acclaim for John Wardle, why are there virtually no others following suit?

Reply by Grant Rosoman

Sir, I urge John Purey-Cust to read my article again. The answers to many of the long list of questions and assertions he makes in his sermon can be found there. He is also well aware of previous publications, policies and articles where Greenpeace has made its position very clear on plantations. In short, Greenpeace supports plantations that are: Protecting and restoring indigenous ecosystems; incorporating diversity in species selection and lay-out; not using GE trees; phasing out toxic, bioaccumulative and persistent pesticide use; supported or have the participation of indigenous landowners; and providing social benefits to local communities. We are participating fully in the national process for Plantation Management Standards that is aiming to agree on the detail on these issues.

With certification NZ plantations are squarely placed in an international context. New Zealand plantation managers and tree growers can take a parochial view and be defensive of any criticism, however, change for

Forest ownership dilemma a numbers game?

Sir, Thank you for your editorial and the articles you published on forest ownership in the May 2003 issue of the NZ Journal of Forestry. I had wondered why some of the larger forest industry companies were selling off part or all of their forests when not long ago they bought them or were expanding their plantings. These articles have helped me understand the thinking.

As an old fashioned forester, we were brought up on Working Plans, Working Circles, an assured wood supply within a realistic cost distance and providing additional forests for any future mill expansions. The Forestry Encouragement Schemes and tax concessions meant that the total forest area grew considerably. The 1981 Forestry Development Conference, the Central North Island Planning Study (CNIPS) and the Northland Transport Studies were all of the “Think Big” style of the time. Little of them have come to pass even 20 years later. In fact in 1988 we were talking about a wood shortage in the Central North Island from 1990 to 1996 and that didn’t happen either. It is no wonder that financiers and economists cannot grapple well with the forest planning and long-term forest economics. Level of debt is stated as a real problem too.

Now the major forest industry corporates want to sell off their forests. Certainly they will guarantee 50% of their wood supply needs with contracts. But it is not very long ago that Carter Holt Harvey Ltd. made more profit out of their Forest Division than from any of their other divisions. Forest investors and timber investment management organisations (TIMO’s) expect to do well around and see things, meet forestry people and get a measure of what is going on. Is preaching the best way to get us round to his way of thinking, or is he only looking for the plaudits of his peers in other environmental organisations?

Above all he mustn’t open his overseas mail for a month and he must stop effectively dumping the consequences of our environmental virtue on third world countries. Be original. Be a Goldstein. A la lanterne McWorld.

John Purey-Cust