Did you ever hear of the nineteenth-century attempt to fly a hot-air balloon across the Atlantic? The European Transport Ship (or ETS for short) had three decks full of passengers. The weather was fine and things were going very well. The Upper Deck held a great party, with a lot of wine and fireworks. Then the trouble started.

The ship's Engineer told the Captain there was a problem. “Make it snappy,” the Captain replied, “I've got a beauty contest to judge.” “Those fireworks,” said the Engineer, “have made a hole in the balloon.” “So?” said the Captain, “what have you got against parties? You're not a spoilsport are you?” The Engineer replied that more hot air was leaving the balloon than entering. In other words, there would be insufficient buoyancy to overcome gravity. And if this continued the ship would have to ditch. “It’s hardly Magnet Science,” he said. (Rocket Science, you'll understand, had yet to be invented).

The Captain called for a second opinion, which in the fullness of time confirmed the Engineer’s dire warnings. So the Captain convened a meeting of all crew and passengers to explain the predicament. “But there is a solution,” he said cheerfully, and gestured to the Engineer to explain.

“Well,” the Engineer cleared his throat, “if everybody throws 20 pounds of luggage onboard, this might get us into a higher air-current. My calculations show we might just make it to America. But we would have to start lightening our load soon!” You should have heard the uproar.

“NO WAY am I chucking my stuff in the sea,” said the fat American lady. “Do you know how much this gold jewellery cost?” And the Lower Deck was equally vehement: “I'm not sure I even possess 20 pounds of luggage,” said a Chinese immigrant. And the representative of the Company that owned the ETS declared: “This proposal would be very bad for business. Imagine the negative publicity! The law suits! You gentlemen have absolutely no business sense!”

Above the tumult, a fresh-faced economist stood up. “The boffins have talked about gravity and buoyancy and so on, but have you considered some even stronger forces that can be brought to bear? Market forces! We'll unleash the power of the market onto the problem. The rich lady will pay the poor Asian gentleman to discard his rags and gruel, and she can keep her jewellery. Problem solved!” The Chinese immigrant muttered that it would take a lot of his shirts to weigh as much as a gold tiara, and, besides, it was the Upper Deck's foolish use of fireworks that had originally caused the problem and they alone should fix it.

“No need for all this hysterical shouting!” said the Sceptic. “It's all bilge, baloney and bunkum anyway. There is no hard evidence that the ship is losing altitude. Just some boffin's equations!” Upset by this attack on his professional integrity, the Engineer showed the Sceptic a graph of the ship's altitude - highly variable (due to atmospheric turbulence) but with a definite downward trend. “See what I mean?” yelled the Sceptic. “For the last two minutes the ship has been gaining altitude! It's all tripe, tommysrot and twaddle, I tell you! Any loss in altitude is entirely due to sunspots! Let's ignore the boffins - who no doubt have concocted the story merely to justify their extravagant pay - and have another glass of wine. The Rio '92 is particular good, I'm told.”

“Perhaps the input of hot air could be increased?” asked the Economist. The balloon's temperature was normally maintained by a furnace, fuelled by a bare-chested and sweating stoker. (The stoker’s name, by the way, was Forrester). The Captain's face brightened. “I'll see to it that Forrester gets a good whipping if he slackens even in the slightest! And, of course, to be fair, if he works extra vigorously I'll increase his water ration.” (The Captain had been reserving the water supplies for the milkmaid’s daily baths.)

And so they continued to bicker and brawl, harangue and haggle and squawk and squabble, as the ETS sank lower and lower. Occasional cries of “pi-jaw, piffle, and poppycock! All to do with sunspots!” could be heard above the din. The Captain went looking for the Engineer to see if there were any better ideas, but he was discovered in a drunken state next to an empty crate of Rio '92. And then the ship hit the waves.

The first impact caused the craft to bounce upwards. A torrent of discarded possessions (usually someone else’s) tumbled overboard, as the panicked passengers realised their predicament and tried to rectify it. But it was too little, too late. The ship had absorbed some sea-water and all the ballast on board would have been insufficient at that stage.

Did anybody successfully make it to America? We don't know. Maybe some future historian might like to tell us.

Piers Maclaren, Editor

Retraction

The August issue's editorial attacked the focus of research shown at the March meeting of FFR's Radiata Theme. Since then, there has been a highly successful meeting in Napier. We are delighted that the earlier editorial's comments did not apply to the subsequent meeting: the programme was well constructed and relevant, the research was well presented, there were presentations that linked with environmental issues, and - most importantly - there was a tangible sense of excitement and potential for the forestry sector. One brickbat, however: the Environment Theme still seemed to be in reactive mode. “Honestly, folks, we foresters are not the bad guys you make us out to be. Stop knocking us.” Instead of this, we would like to see forestry stepping onto the front foot: “People have stuffed up our waterways, our less stable hillsides, our unique wildlife and now our atmosphere, but - not to worry - the good news is that we foresters are here to help”.

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