

FORESTRY AND RURAL SOCIAL CHANGE: A COMMENT

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ABSTRACT

The growth predicted for the forestry sector over the next two decades will bring about considerable social change in various regions in New Zealand, particularly in major project areas. Problems are likely to arise where expansion and development are seen as threatening the quality of rural life, the assumed benefits to local employment and income do not eventuate, or local autonomy is undermined. The importance of these factors must be recognised in planning for the expected expansion in the forest industry.

BACKGROUND

The social effects of development and change in rural regions can be examined under three headings: (1) The quality of rural life, (2) employment and income opportunities in rural areas, (3) effects on decision-making at the local level. Much of the research into the dimensions of social change in rural communities (e.g., Rogers and Burdge, 1972; Ford, 1978) and ways of "organising" change in these communities (Loomis and Beagle, 1975) has developed out of a concern with these issues. Studies have been carried out in the United States on rural depopulation (Fuguitt, 1971; NCRC, 1974) and the more recent trend away from "urban concentration" (Tucker, 1976; Ploch, 1978; Schwarzweller, 1979). A summary assessment has been made of the New Zealand situation (Barker and Brown, 1980).

This research has shown up some of the reservations rural sociologists have about the effects of population change on rural communities. For example, in his paper on "places left behind" Fuguitt (1971) comments on the tendency to assume that growth is somehow bad for metropolitan centres but good for rural regions. He also points out that relatively little is known about the association between population trends and levels and the viability of economic and social services, and questions the wis-

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dom behind attempts to open up opportunities in rural regions so as to discourage rural-urban migration.

Looking at the other end of the migration question, Schwarzweller (1979) notes that the economic drain resulting from depopulation may not be as disruptive on communities as the arrival of lots of newcomers. On top of this, community solidarity could well be threatened by disputes over the rate and direction of development, and the ways in which the resources of the community are distributed.

These cautionary points conflict with the call for rural re-development and industrialisation as a means of maintaining viable rural communities, particularly where the inequalities between rural and urban regions are rather more pronounced (Wilkinson, 1978).

The need for a secure rural sector has often been discussed in New Zealand, especially in the agricultural context (Cant *et al.*, 1980; Gillies, 1980). But what of the relationship between forestry development and the well-being of our rural communities? Owing to past and current planting rates, the amount of harvestable wood in exotic forests is expected to increase markedly after 1990, particularly in certain major project areas. This increase in harvest and the concomitant expansion of processing facilities will pose numerous social and economic problems for regional and community planning particularly in terms of the headings noted above.

QUALITY OF RURAL LIFE

Quality of life may be seen in terms of the degree of "contentedness" a person experiences within the prevailing social situation. Anything that threatens the basic values and norms by which social life is organised within a community is seen to have the potential to reduce the level of individual and community satisfaction, and hence is likely to become a target for vigorous criticism. The "case" against forestry development is currently presented in a way that actually *masks* fundamental fears which emerge from a concern for the quality of life in rural communities. Three dimensions are of particular importance in this underlying concern:

- (1) Being usually a large-scale land-user, forestry immediately contravenes a fundamental ethic bound up in the private ownership of small landholdings. These "property norms" permeate much of New Zealand society. They are not tied specifically to either the rural or the urban setting.

- (2) Forestry introduces a style and form of work that is considered to be incompatible with local work patterns. Greater routine and a loss of autonomy and flexibility are seen to characterise these new job opportunities.
- (3) Forestry tends to bring into a community a new business and specialist group whose economic interests and social views conflict with those held by the established local power group. This latter group see a possible undermining of their security in local body affairs.

The conflict between forestry development and other sectors will not be resolved unless these contradictions are openly recognised.

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME OPPORTUNITIES

Forestry development unquestionably provides new opportunities for employment in a region or community. There has been disagreement, though, as to the extent of the benefits to be derived. For example, Fraser and Horgan (1978) and Grant (1977) are critical of the Forestry Development Plan for Otago (NZFS, 1975) in that they feel it over-estimates the employment advantages which might result from the growth of forestry in this region. In order to assess the impacts of forestry on employment it is necessary to recognise the distribution between unemployment and underemployment, and to discourage the bringing-in of additional labour from other regions until the local employment needs are met (Grant, 1979). Those involved in development may need to extend their training function in order to ensure that the locals are given the opportunity to acquire relevant skills should they choose to do so.

Finally, because of the nature of forestry development there is the difficulty of providing *balanced* employment to cater for the work needs of both men and women in various age groups. This problem requires attention, although it is possibly not as important in a "mixed economy" environment.

Forestry, like all industries that locate in rural areas, can also generate problems that are "unanticipated and unplanned for" (Bertrand, 1978). For example, there is the "leakage" of economic benefits. This refers to the possibility that benefits (profits) from a particular development may not always remain in the community or region in question. There can be problems resulting from the induced instability of the local real estate market and the short-run boom-type demands for facilities and

services. The latter concern arises from the fact that the pressure for services in the building phase of the development often drops away after the plant begins operation. Local interests are generally not attracted to the idea of providing services for residents whose stay is temporary. There is therefore a need for those involved in the operational phase of the development to patronise local services as much as possible. In order to do this, some modification to the purchasing and servicing procedures of Government departments and private companies may be required (Grant, 1979).

LOCAL DECISION-MAKING

Forestry introduces an element of bureaucracy into rural regions. As this generally implies reduced decision-making at the local level, it arouses concern about the possibility of local interests being sacrificed to the whims of some externally controlled venture. In a study on attitudes to change in the Mangonui, County, Northland (Smith and Wilson, 1980), preliminary analysis of some 500 interviews shows that only 20% of respondents felt they had any influence over what developments took place in their community. On the other hand, over 40% said they would like to have more say. By increasing the extent of local involvement in decision-making, the likelihood of a better fit between the style and shape of the development and local needs is enhanced. This will ultimately be an advantage to all parties, notwithstanding the inherent differences of viewpoint associated with the competing interests of "capital" and "community".

CONCLUSIONS

The social aspects of forestry development in New Zealand warrant more research, for although some studies have been made of forestry villages (Chapple, 1973) and the single-industry pulp and paper towns (Whitelaw, 1961; Chapple, 1976; James, 1979), little attention has been paid to the social implications of forestry for existing communities. The contribution forestry can make to a region's development depends very much on the specific physical, biological, economic, social, and cultural conditions to be found there. Social change of any sort inevitably implies some degree of conflict, so the overall aim of those involved in forestry should be to try to reconcile national needs to local ones, otherwise the opposition to the intrusion of different land-uses could well heighten as the competition for land increases.

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