



## Editorial

# Forest 'value', sustainability and utilisation

Aldo Leopold had it right: some things are just plain 'right'. We know this because of our ethics and our experience tells us so. Only the arch-rationalists – who have contempt for experience (and probably ethics as well) – would disagree. At the risk of being hoisted on my own petard by being specific, let me illustrate: you would be hard pressed to find an individual who thought that sustainable management of forests was not 'right', nor for that matter, the planting of New Zealand's own indigenous species for eventual timber production, as foresters past, and more recently even Greenpeace, have advocated. You would also be unlikely to find anybody condemning the utilisation of timber in higher-value end-uses, as compared with wood chips or 100 x 50 clear rimu heart. Does everyone agree? Speak now or forever hold thy peace.

Unfortunately this is where agreement stops: the means to this end is not so clear, and what is 'right' becomes confused by value judgements, as, for instance, our approach to forest value.

### The Importance of Forest Value

New Zealand has a history of developing policies that decrease the long-term value of our forests, both indigenous and cultural in origin. We mined the early indigenous resource and flooded the market with some of the best timber in the world in the interests of grass and quick bucks; we continued to massively over-cut that resource, even when grass was not an option on the land, in the interests of votes masquerading as 'regional development'; we artificially depressed wood prices in the short-term interests (and, in some cases, not so short) of processing industries, and we applied, and continue to apply, export bans in the interests of pressure groups, usually expressing noble motives.

Our macho pioneering culture (and ethics) at the time valued grass and industrial development over wetlands (then called swamps), wildlife, trees and aesthetic/intrinsic values. Trees and associated ecosystems were perceived to have less utility, or worth, to society, and policies made the perception a reality. Such a policy approach was counter-productive

to the ends we know are 'right'. Forestry operations were characterised by insensitive use of heavy machinery and a 'production' mentality; only those with enormous faith planted indigenous trees for timber; and cheap wood was processed for a cheap return.

The opposite tack, of valuing the forests highly, is arguably the best means of ensuring those ends of sustainability, indigenous plantings and high-value utilisation are achieved.

### Value and Sustainable Management

A highly-valued forest can justify more expansive, environmentally sensitive harvesting methods, for example helicopters and selection logging systems, and more intensive stand monitoring. Production of volume, the overriding emphasis of past New Zealand harvesting practices, should then become subservient to production of value.

Forest value comes in two parts: 1. The value of the sustainable forest produce, be it either timber or alternative harvests such as fungi or game; and 2. an appreciation of the intrinsic values of forests. An example is the way the South Africans manage their stands of Stinkwood (*Ocotea bullata*) and Yellowwood (*Podocarpus falcatus*). The timber value is very high, as is the appreciated worth of the ecosystem associated. Individual trees are monitored and extremely sensitive extraction methods are employed. With a world price for indigenous timbers, there is no reason why something similar could not happen here, should our policies allow.

### Value, Indigenous Plantings and Utilisation

Sustainability assured, the other two 'rights' tag along. High value is an incentive to establishment of long-rotation indigenous species, and a high-value raw material ensures that processors have to work and innovate for their profit. Pulpwood miraculously becomes utilised as higher-grade material, and growers begin to insist on a greater diversity of log grades. Material once treated as waste in the forest becomes part of the harvest. The 1993 log price spike was an appropriate lesson in exactly these mechanics. The

opposite mechanics of broad grades, poor value utilisation and waste were common as mud (and there was a lot of that as well) when timber and the forest ecosystem were 'cheap'.

### Some Thoughts on Policy Options

Policies that enable potential forest value to be realised ought to be encouraged, and those that are impediments to achieving that potential ought to be revised. Access to a world market price consistent within the limits of a sustainable level of supply is one step. That would mean no more export bans, nor any future ones considered.

Another step would be some inclusion of the intrinsic values of forest ecosystems, be those forests indigenous or cultural in origin, on the balance sheets and income statements of company accounts: the "Green Accounting" of Al Gore fame. Most forest owners would argue that the values of water quality, soil conservation, mitigation of natural hazards, recreation, CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration and wildlife habitat which all forests produce, are more valuable as external benefits to society rather than as direct benefits to the owners.

The issue then becomes, along with the not inconsiderable problem of quantifying these values: how can those social benefits be transferred back to those forest owners? The Resource Management Act (1991) may be the key. There may be opportunities under this legislation by which benefits are traded between owners and ratepayers (via their councils). Or, dare I say such an unfashionable thing, mayhap Central Government has a role.

### The Role of the Preservationists

There is, as always, an irony. Some of those that purport to "most love" sustainability, choose as their means policies that devalue forests and forest produce, thereby ensuring that sustainability is harder to achieve. Much of their rationale is anti-commerce. They believe trees are 'right' as long as nobody makes money out of them (see John Purey-Cust's comment, page 4). Any proposal to manage sensitive ecosystems for human gain is debunked as a "myth", when, given the right approach to value, anything is pos-

sible.

Their propaganda states that forests that have commercial value cannot by definition have intrinsic values; ignoring or discounting the evidence to the contrary. Chip and timber exports they perceive to be "bad" (although it is very unclear why), so they try, and sometimes succeed, in banning them. They attempt to make planning legislation restrictive and expensive, this apparently being the best way to ensure sustainable management.

One suspects that, while describing themselves as 'conservationists', which, before the Oxford English Dictionary

changed its meaning, used to include an element of 'use', their approach and beliefs are 'preservationist'. Any human use is 'bad', Kaitiakitanga included, unless it is minimal and on a 'hunter-gatherer' level.

We live in a world of scarce and diminishing resources, with a rapidly expanding population with wants and needs: who can be sure that a strategy of preservation, with the exclusion of human commercial gain that it implies, is a practicable, or **sustainable** option? True 'conservation', meaning use in perpetuity, is our only hope in the long run.

These are general points, and by no means aimed at all groups, some of which are truly conservationist in the old sense of the word. However, one wonders if the more extreme groups have ever considered that by devaluing forests, particularly those with a 'cultural' origin, their efforts may be counter productive to the sustainability ends they espouse – or perhaps their definition of sustainability does not include that species *Homo sapiens*. Welcome to Jonestown?

**Chris Perley**

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## A triunity responds to Craig Potton's 'A public perception of plantation forestry'

### **Mick O'Neill responds**

If Craig Potton's perception of plantation forestry (*Comment, NZ Forestry, August 1994*) is representative of his particular pressure group, then it would appear that some people are totally confused. In addition, in developing this perception he has made a number of claims using extravagant language in his assessment of the South Island beech management proposals. Claims of loss of fertility, soil erosion, increased flooding, and destruction of wildlife when logged indigenous forests are converted to exotics are not supported by any data or references to reputable research findings. He also manages to get the only area figure he quotes wrong by about 50 per cent. I suggest Mr Potton goes back to the original White Paper (NZFS 1971) and reads it carefully and refers to the Report of the NZ Institute of Foresters Council published in the NZ Journal of Forestry Volume 17(1): 112-136 (1972) and the editorial in the same issue. If the scatter gun claims of Mr Potton are weighed against the considered views of organisations that commented at the time – including the Forest Research Institute, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Royal New Zealand Forest and Bird Protection Society, the Soil Conservation Society and Soil Conservation authorities – then I suggest there is no contest.

Mr Potton's perception of plantation forestry appears to change from total hostility to grudging acceptance during the course of his article and it appears that one of the major companies meets well his approval. He would present a more persuasive argument if he produced solid infor-

mation and relied less on perceived disasters and the total distortion of management practices to bolster an emotional argument. I think it is unfortunate that this type of material is given space in the Journal.

**G.M. O'Neill**

### **Priestley Thomson responds**

I am in full agreement with Mr O'Neill's comments on Craig Potton's rather unprofessional article in what is a professional journal.

Could I further stress these facts:

- that the Government at the time knew that large areas of West Coast beech forest were capable of sustained yield management and believed that it ought to take place;
- that the presence on a large scale of bad timber defects meant that only a pulp and paper industry could give full utilisation;
- that the Forest Service undertook extensive surveys to classify the area into categories that could be utilised and categories that ought to be reserved for soil and water conservation, scenery protection, wildlife values or recreational potential;
- that the minimum economic size for a kraft pulp mill was considered by the industry to be at least 500 or 600 tonnes per day;
- that the sustained yield of the beech forests could not support a mill of this size;
- and thus that a supplementary exotic forest resource would have to be created.

The last item mentioned is the nub of the matter. The revised breakdown of the West Coast project reserved nearly 400,000 hectares of native forest for a variety of purposes, mainly soil and water conservation. Of the remaining 243,000 hectares, the total area for conversion to plantations was 97,000 hectares – under 40 per cent. The percentage would be very much less if expressed as a proportion of remaining merchantable forest area in New Zealand; would be much less still, if it were expressed as a proportion of New Zealand's total forest area; and would be **infinitesimal** when compared to the area of forest already clearfelled and converted to grassland. It was considered that the economic and social benefits which would accrue locally, and to New Zealand generally, would far outweigh the disadvantages that could be caused by clearfelling and converting this area. The decision to promote it was a careful and conscientious one, well thought out. It was not, repeat **not**, as Mr Potton claims, "infamous".

In 1971 White Paper (NZFS 1971) invited and got a lot of public comment. It is significant that of the many organisations approached the only one to counsel against the establishment of exotics was the Royal New Zealand Forest and Bird Protection Society. They did not know, and we certainly did not, that in less than ten years the environmental movement would gain such prominence that it could claim the public was against virtually any clearfelling of native forest. Forest and Bird was then the most important protection organisation and here its thinking was well ahead of the times.