

THE INTERPRETATION OF A FOREST

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Forest interpretation involves a conscious effort on our part to educate the public and help them to understand what forests are about. A recent visit to Victoria State Forest Park in North Westland provoked the thought that we often achieve the opposite to what we intend. Rather than help people to gain a more balanced perception, we may often reinforce a distortion.

The romantic illusions of man's simple and creative relationship with nature have been finally shattered by the environmental movement. We have been reawakened to a truth repeatedly ignored throughout history, that all forms of land use have a destructive aspect. Debate over the conflict this truth has created has tended to centre on the sustainability of biological and ecological processes. As land users we make feeble noises about economics and production to justify the destructive aspects of our activities and in so doing we accept responsibility for them. In fact, the context of the debate should be cultural, not ecological, and the whole of society held responsible. It is, after all, the so-called destructive aspects of land use which have made possible creative benefits in culture. The interpretation of forests in a cultural context is therefore essential if people are to appreciate their broader role. Ecological processes operate within this cultural context and not in isolation from it, as much of our interpretation of nature would suggest.

All judgements are made on the basis of what is seen but much always remains unseen. The early fascination with flight was surely the prospect of seeing more rather than the technical challenge. Seeing more represents a survival advantage in holding the prospect of knowing more. Confusion arises, attributable to people's interpretation of what they know about what they see. People know that the Forest Service cuts down trees and they see the impact of management practices in their destructive aspect. But both the "knowing" and the "seeing" are superficial and forest managers react to their criticisms with a paternalistic tolerance, or intolerance; they just do not understand — they are ignorant. But this ignorance is as much with the criticised as the critic and only we, the criticised, have the resources to correct the distortions. This is what we are attempting to do with our interpretation; but are we interpreting forests in their correct context?

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We need a revised interpretation of landscape, land use, and conservation which more closely approximates our claimed objectives of multiple use and land use integration. Far more importantly, we need an interpretation which acknowledges rather than denies the realities of both our cultural history and our social objectives.

A number of fundamental issues need to be explored before we can begin to sensibly interpret the broader landscape and what it means. Victoria S.F. Park provides an excellent opportunity to do this. The park covers an area greater than Arthur's Pass N.P., Nelson Lakes N.P., and Sumner S.F. Park all combined together. These latter are all clearly defined in their use; protection and recreation. Victoria S.F. Park is, by comparison, infinitely more complex. The present patterns reflect a colourful history of diverse activities and enterprises and the lowland areas of the park have been profoundly altered by cultural activities. The park is generally seen from the lowland areas except where the State Highway crosses Rahu Saddle, but here views are constrained by dense bush. It is very difficult to see other than the edge of State forest, and much of what may be assumed to be State forest is not. What is seen is a landscape recording the historical process of edge attrition. It becomes understandable when people concerned about the conservation of indigenous forests criticise the Forest Service when the only place they see relatively intact forests at close range from highways is in scenic reserves. Most forests in the Park are a backdrop to agricultural development within which there is a preponderance of exotic material, and exotic trees assume a major visual significance. The landscape quality of the Maruia Valley has far more to do with the appropriate management of agricultural land and its indigenous remnants than the management of State forests, although this is not to deny that in specific areas the latter is extremely important. It does not make sense to interpret the area administratively defined as State Forest in isolation of land to which it is geographically and historically intimately related, since people will not understand what they see unless these relationships are clearly established. Their interpretation of what they see will be influenced by what they know and their fears will be of further production and forest attrition. In fact, the timber production role of the Victoria S.F. Park area is now and always has been extremely minor. The forest has a far more important role in protecting the agriculturally developed land in the lowland valleys. In terms of the historic use of the Park area the extraction of resources other than timber

has been far more significant and vital to the development of other areas, often remote from the Park. The nature of such endeavours has profoundly influenced the evolution of skills in New Zealand as a whole as well as the character and culture of our communities.

People see in Victoria S.F. Park not a formerly pristine environment, despoiled by timber production and remaining under threat, but a landscape which has far more to say about history, people and culture than pristine nature. This is a history of extremely creative, industrious and innovative enterprises and not simply a mindless production of $4 \times 2s$.

The area has a greater depth of meaning than a superficial estimate of "visual quality" would suggest. Scenery, vistas, and floristic composition are all extremely important, but ultimately they are only indicators of quality rather than absolutes. In New Zealand our perceptions of quality are too often synonymous with the undisturbed indigenous and pristine, unblemished by man. Such perceptions tend to deny any possibility of creative action on man's part.

If the highways associated with Victoria S.F. Park went through continuous virgin bush the experience would at best be tedious, and for many quite disturbing. There would be no "scenery", no "views", no patterns of vegetation defined by open areas, no signs of human activity, no sense of history, no sense of direction and (in the absence of some biological understanding), no meaning. Development on the forest edges has undoubtedly added something which is experienced but not necessarily "seen" in the strict sense, and it has in some indefinable way been creative, so what people "see" as having been destructive (the removal of indigenous vegetation), has in some strange way been creative, but not just in a material sense. In other words, man's influences can be seen as destructive from a biological viewpoint but as creative when seen in a cultural perspective.

Quality in a cultural landscape has something to do with the balance between what has been added and what has been taken away. The balance lies in the whole thing rather than the bits and pieces. The Park's history is one of bits and pieces, a series of isolated activities. These activities were not seen at the time as being interrelated or having influence beyond themselves because the people involved were isolated. The earliest co-ordination was administrative, not ecological, and divided according to the spheres of influence of different government departments. To attribute the

recognition of interactions and previously disregarded impacts to some new ecological awareness, or to a newly discovered conservation ethic rather than a previously exploitive perspective, is to miss the point. The truth is that the recognition of relationships previously disregarded is attributable to new cultural perceptions and not to a reawakening to ecological realities. People are now "seeing" far more as a result of technology; they "see" a broader perspective. Technology has exacted a large environmental cost, but who can say what impacts there were when birds took flight? Time softens change which only the most perceptive can see; a new balance must have been found and for those unfortunates who did not get airborne but continued to fossick on the earth, extinction has all but exclusively been their fate.

With an expanded perspective, a greater seeing, there is more to be known and understood. Perceived conflicts in land use require a more satisfactory explanation, an expanded interpretation. They will not be resolved in an ecological understanding, for the conflicts are cultural not ecological. This is not to deny the need for ecological understanding and environmental protection, but this is not where the resolution of conflict lies. As forest managers, we reinforce the conflict we are attempting to resolve by explaining what people are seeing in a biological context when there is a far more important cultural context which we ignore.

The landscape can only be clearly interpreted with reference not to its historical administration and biological content, but to the intimate relationship between people and the environment. This is culture. To talk about resources in a simplistic biological sense within a cold anonymous administrative context is to paint an inadequate, abstract picture of a very rich and dynamic relationship between a diverse cross-section of pioneers from many different countries, discovering relationships with one another and a new environment. At a human and personal level we can identify with their lives and better understand their mistakes. Of far greater importance we can discern our cultural roots; these were our people and we can forgive them their mistakes while acknowledging their successes. At this deeper level of interpretation we can bring people closer to an identification with the place and its history, so that they can begin to judge not superficially and with the wisdom (usually someone else's), of hindsight but in the context of the time. In this understanding, at least, some will come to accept that an acknowledgment of the creative benefits bestowed implies an acceptance of a shared responsibility for the destruction necessary for their creation.

All human endeavours have a destructive aspect, and those who would wish to insulate themselves and claim the virtue that their creative endeavours do not share this character should be reminded that somewhere in the biosphere their actions have incurred a cost. As forest managers we will continue to be seen as destructive so long as we continue to deny society the opportunity to understand both its historic and continuing role in landuse, and that cultural benefits have costs which are a shared responsibility. Because we have not, until very recently, acknowledged the broader role forests have to play in society, we have been unable to acknowledge historically the role society and culture have played in shaping our forests. Land management is not just a response to a human need for material wealth, and thus destruction of "defenceless nature". Stated or not, it is always a response to creative culture.

We have gone too far in seeking to explain and interpret "nature". As a highly esteemed recreation ranger was recently heard to remark, "It's bush walks, bush walks and more bloody bush walks". The importance of experiencing pristine nature cannot be denied, but in truth it is easier to capture a child's imagination with a cut stump than a living specimen. The stump poses a question relevant to the human context. It is a more honest message about reality.

Victoria S.F. Park has a unique character and is quite different in its patterns from any other National or Forest Park. It is not mothballed nature to be gaped at. It is neither the product of nature *per se*, nor of strictly "forestry endeavours". It is the product of a diverse range of interactions between man and nature, a complex cultural pattern. There are many opportunities in Westland to experience the wilderness, to transcend the mundane, the realities of human endeavour. This is an essential freedom but such experiences have nothing to say about the nature of man's relationship with the land. Man needs to act on the land, live not in a state of transcendence from it but in an intimate relationship with it. Surely this is the message interpretation must convey.

Technology has given us wings but exposed us to a frightening vista. A new seeing demands a greater knowing. A greater knowing demands an expanded responsibility. We are fledglings in flight seeing a new environment in which we must redefine our place. To do this we must share the vista rather than continue to fossick in our isolated enclaves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

These thoughts, jumbled as they may be, are provoked by the plaintive pleas of forest managers who are suffering the alienation of being misunderstood. In giving society what it wants it is time they made society responsible for what it takes. Bruce Watson must be given credit for an expanded understanding of the need, displayed in his interpretation of the historic role of forests in Westland.