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## *Special Section: Beech Forest Management*

# Timberlands' Beech Project Deserves to Succeed

**Guy Salmon**  
Chief Executive, Maruia Society  
PO Box 756 Nelson

Opposition to Timberlands West Coast Ltd's beech management proposals has become the main focus of a new generation of native forest campaigners trading under the name of Native Forest Action (NFA).

In its choice of name and tactics, NFA seeks to stand on the shoulders of the original Native Forests Action Council or NFAC (now the Maruia Society) which led the successful native forest campaigns of the 70s and 80s. NFA's Buller treetop protest imitates NFAC's Pureora treetop protest. Its Kawatiri Declaration imitates the Maruia Declaration. Similarly, many slogans and punchlines are being recycled.

Should I be flattered? In fact I find it all rather disturbing, for two reasons, the first philosophical, the second relating to the practical realities of forest management today. Let me develop the philosophical point first. There is a crucial difference between the Maruia Declaration, NFAC's 1975 charter for forest conservation that attracted more than a third of a million signatures, and NFA's 1997 Kawatiri Declaration.

The Maruia Declaration aimed to set a new direction and emphasis toward native forest preservation, but it explicitly allowed that regional socio-economic needs and an in-perpetuity supply of native timber for future generations were legitimate objectives for forest management. This philosophical approach was consistently followed. It led eventually to agreement on the West Coast Accord, which as well as establishing extensive reserves, included provisions for supporting the regional timber industry, and for a sustained yield beech scheme.

The Kawatiri Declaration in contrast is single-minded in its insistence that "all remaining areas of native forest deserve full and immediate protection from logging." With such a simplistic demand promoted as the absolute goal, the possibility of fruitful dialogue with other interests is foreclosed, and forest management for timber production is pre-judged and rejected without regard to its quality or its rationale.

There is nothing new about this abso-

lutist line of thinking. It was ceaselessly advocated in debates within NFAC, especially during the eighties; but despite many heated discussions, it was never adopted as our policy. As an approach to the issue, it should be rejected now for the same reasons that we rejected it then: because at the national level, it is a simplistic, illiberal and undemocratic stance to take in relation to the management of such a diverse and important public resource.

In those days, I also used to argue that adopting such an absolute goal was not good politics, because it would curtail the flexibility which we in NFAC needed to make a deal and find a solution to the impasse over forest protection and management, especially on the West Coast. Today that particular argument is not so persuasive: indeed the politics of the issue have become rather one-sided, so that it has become pretty easy to 'save' more forests and to trample politically on those who want, or rely on, or could benefit from, sustainable forest management. In this difficult atmosphere, Timberlands West Coast Ltd is struggling to win political support for its beech plans which, in my view, are impressive: the only really impressive plans for sustainable forest management that I have ever seen.

That leads me to the second reason I feel disturbed when NFA capitalises on the goodwill in the community toward forest conservation that NFAC fostered so strongly, and tries to turn it against the Timberlands' proposals. I frankly never expected that professional foresters could come up with anything as good as the current beech proposals; and now that they have done so, I would like them to succeed.

What Timberlands has shown is an outstanding capacity to take its critics seriously and address their issues, to commission needed research and apply the findings, to break away from the old dogmas about how beech forests needed to be managed, and to operationalise a big and broad vision of sustainability. It has of course been greatly aided by the new economic realities which allow the routine use of helicopters for timber extraction

from the forest. All this is a big change from previous decades.

The context in which Timberlands' proposals are put forward is also hugely changed. Today, 96 per cent of New Zealand's native forest is effectively protected from timber extraction (although not yet from biodiversity loss — but that is another story). The Forest Service with its pro-timber bias has gone, and we have a Department of Conservation with a mandate for preservation. Only 4 per cent of the nation's native forest area is potentially still available for timber production. Within that 4 per cent, the style of management has generally, broken decisively with the past. Clearfelling and exotic conversion have disappeared from mainstream forestry, remaining the practice of only a few small-time renegades. Sustainable forest management is generally a legal requirement. In the case of the Timberlands' beech proposal, the standard of management is particularly sophisticated and impressive. So while the symbols and slogans of forest campaigns don't seem to have changed in 25 years, the reality in the forest has changed utterly.

Against this backdrop, it just isn't appropriate to run the sort of campaign against indigenous forest managers that we ran back in the 70s and 80s. Indeed, it seems counterproductive today, for it diverts community energies and political attention that ought to be focused on the real problems — such as the need to incentivise conservation of biodiversity on private land, and the need to stem the ongoing decline of the extensive forests that are in DOC's care.

Timberlands' management proposals have yet to be tested in the Environment Court, which they should be, and they may be further improved as a result. At the end of the day, I am expecting to be able to buy native timber from this project with a clear conscience. Today's beech project represents a huge advance in forestry professionalism, performance and responsiveness to community concerns. It deserves to be supported, and to succeed.