

Awarding the Kirk Medal 2004

Dr Mike Wilcox

The Kirk Medal is awarded every two years as the NZ Institute of Forestry's tribute to high scholarship in contributions to scientific forestry in New Zealand. The 2004 Kirk Medal was awarded to Dr Mike Wilcox, BSc (Auckland), MA (Oxon.), PhD (North Carolina State). As well as receiving the medal, Mike also holds the historic Kirk horn flask for the next two years.

Mike is a Registered Forestry Consultant, resident in Auckland. He had a career from 1959 to 1990 with the NZ Forest Service, later the Ministry of Forestry, based 1966-1990 at the Forest Research Institute, Rotorua. There he was involved in species evaluation and tree breeding, and later as a research director with responsibilities for forest genetics and tree breeding, plant propagation, weed & pest control, forest health, and indigenous forest ecology and management. He himself specialised in Eucalyptus, and also on genetic improvement of radiata pine and Douglas-fir. Since 1990 he has been actively engaged in consulting work with Jaakko Pöyry Consulting, undertaking assignments on forest development in many countries.

Mike started his forestry career in 1959 as a Technical Trainee in the Auckland Conservancy of the NZ Forest Service, based at Pureora Forest and Te Kuiti under the watchful eye of Ivan Frost. He got his first taste of forest research assisting Tony Beveridge with investigations on podocarp forest management. Stationed in Auckland for his university studies, Mike developed his early experience in forest inventory and management planning under the guidance of Malcolm Conway, Joe Levy and Dave St John in Auckland, and through short postings to Kaingaroa Forest (under the tutelage of P. F. Olsen), Maramarua Forest (Gavin Molloy), Waipoua Forest, Golden Downs Forest, and on high country surveys in Canterbury (Waimakariri) and Southland (Eyre and Takitimu Mts).

On his return from Oxford University in 1966 he was "temporarily" attached to the Forest Research Institute, in Rotorua assisting Ib Thulin with provenance trials and the radiata pine breeding work. This was a turning point for he was encouraged to take up forest genetics and tree breeding as a career – helped on his way by a three-year stint at North Carolina State University working in Bruce Zobel's Southern Pine Tree Breeding Cooperative Programme. For his thesis he investigated genetic variation in wood brightness in loblolly pine as a basis for selecting whiter (lower lignin) wood for high-yield pulping.



Eucalyptus grandis, 20 years old in a provenance trial planted by Mike in Waitangi Forest in 1977.

Mike's research career started in earnest on his return from the USA in 1973, and he was variously involved in the main-stream radiata pine improvement programme, provenance trial work, and later in laying the foundations for the genetic improvement of eucalypts. A visit to Brazil in 1980 left a deep impression on him – especially the wondrous growth of eucalypts there and the go-ahead forestry programmes of Aracruz, Riocell and Klabin. In 1981 he was awarded an ANZAC fellowship to investigate the natural ecology and silviculture of eucalypts in Australia. Towards the end of this three-month visit, Mike was in a remote mountainous area between Canberra and the coast and came across a eucalypt he had not seen before. Evidently no one else had seen this one before, either, and CSIRO taxonomists subsequently named the tree *Eucalyptus wilcoxii*. It is a smallish, mallee-type tree confined to the Deua National Park in New South Wales.

On Ib Thulin's retirement in 1984, Mike was appointed leader of the Genetics & Tree Improvement group (GTI) in Rotorua, and, after some reorganisations at the FRI, Director of Forest Health and Improvement. A milestone was taking part in 1985 in one of the first major forestry delegations to China. This was organised by the Forest Service through the Chinese Ministry of



With forest officers at Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, India, where Mike Wilcox was advising on forestry programmes for teak, eucalypts and *Casuarina equisetifolia*. The guns are standard equipment for forest protection.

Forestry, and comprised Andy Kirkland, Colin Bassett, John Groome, Steve Chou, Dennis Neilsen, John Rex, Ian Trotman, Mike Wilcox, and Brent Lonn. This was to be the start of Mike's long relationship with China, involving hosting visiting groups, training programmes, joint research projects, and consulting assignments. He was an advisor in China's one million hectare National Afforestation Project, supported by the World Bank.

In 1990 Mike moved to Auckland to join Groome Pöyry Ltd (later Jaakko Pöyry Consulting) as a Senior Forest Consultant. Assignments took him to forestry projects in Indonesia, Philippines, Fiji, Samoa, Malaysia, Laos, Vietnam, China, India, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Spain and Turkey, and Australia. In Indonesia Mike was engaged as a tree improvement specialist for several large pulp and paper companies. He developed breeding programmes for *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia*. Mike had to deal in many cases with poorly adapted species and finding solutions to large areas of failed plantations. He was never put off by this and, to many of his fellow consultants left behind to implement his work, Mike's positive spirit was a great source of strength.

It is in China, however, that Mike has spent most of his time offshore in the "Jaakko Poyry Foreign Legion" and it is possibly in this country



In a plantation of *Paulownia elongata*, Luyi Country, Henan, China, March 1996.

that Mike has made his greatest contribution to forestry. He has travelled to many parts of China investigating and evaluating forestry projects. His latest work has been in as Forestry Science Advisor to an AUSAID project in Qinghai Province concerned with stabilisation of eroding land in the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

Mike is a very experienced traveler who delights in trying out the local foods and culture. He is reported to have taken a group of younger, rather less experienced, Kiwi forestry consultants to lunch one day in a restaurant in the south of China which specialised in serving dog meat. Being quite hungry the group sat down to try the local soup. Pulling the lid of the pot off with a flourish Mike introduced his team mates to the local speciality - Dog Penis soup. "This looks rather good" said Mike rubbing his hands....

Most of Mike's more recent written work is in the form of assignment reports, which remain largely buried and inaccessible. Earlier on whilst at the Forest Research Institute he published numerous scientific papers on tree breeding and forest genetics, and in 1997 wrote a booklet, "A catalogue of the eucalypts".

In his spare time Mike is investigating the dendrology of Auckland – recording the various trees that have been introduced and grown for amenity in the parks and gardens. He has just completed with Dr Rod Bieleski the editing of a 700-page book of collected papers on the *Araucariaceae*, covering the world's species of *Agathis* and *Araucaria*, and also *Wollemia*, to be published by the International Dendrology Society. He is a member of the International Dendrology Society, and is also the President of the Auckland Botanical Society, a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Forestry, and an honorary tree guide at Cornwall Park, Auckland.