

New Zealand's march towards sustainable forest management – the untold story

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Abstract

The outcomes of international negotiation processes relating to sustainable forest management (or SFM) are generally well documented and easily accessible through published material. However what may not be available is information about the negotiation processes and country positions that led to the outcomes. It is important to understand how and why certain positions, statements or wording in the documentation were arrived at. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to fill this gap in information relating to New Zealand's progress towards sustainable forest management from the author's 15 years of involvement in international negotiations. It may not provide the complete picture, but it is hoped that the publication of this account will stimulate others who were also associated with the process to help improve the narrative and fill in any gaps for the sake of posterity. These are personal views.

Earth Summit

The first major global event that drew the world's attention to the need for sustainable resource use was the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly referred as the 'Earth Summit'. It was held on 2–14 June 1992 at Rio de Janeiro attended by 30,000 people representing governments, NGOs and media organisations, including 116 heads of state. Its outputs included:

- The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development enunciating 27 principles on the environment and development
- Agenda 21, a non-binding UN action plan on sustainable development
- The Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of a Global Consensus on the Conservation, Management and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests, referred to as the 'Forest Principles'. As this tortured title suggests, the Forest Principles and the concept of sustainable forest management were hotly debated in the run up to the Rio Earth Summit.

The Earth Summit came at a time when the world was experiencing massive loss of tropical forests (around 15 million ha each year), which was making headlines around the globe, and severe degradation of many temperate and boreal forests due to acid rain. In determining how to address the issues, the views of developed countries (mostly with temperate and boreal forests) and of developing countries (mainly tropical) were far apart. While the developed countries sought an end to this dreadful damage to forests through a legally binding convention to be negotiated in parallel with the biodiversity and climate change conventions, the arguments of developing countries were more involved.

In a nutshell their reasoning was that tropical forests are clearly their sovereign resource – not like atmosphere and oceans, which are global commons. Furthermore, the economic growth achieved by developed countries was based on the exploitation of their natural resources, especially forests, and they have no right to ask tropical countries not to do the same now. Developing countries also felt that if developed countries wanted them to preserve their forests, then they must compensate them for not utilising them.

The negotiations that followed added a lot of drama. The developing countries comprising the 'Group of 77 and China' were led by the powerful Malaysian Ambassador to Italy, Wen Lian Ting. Environmental groups who lost out on several confrontations with her on Malaysia's forestry practices called her the 'Dragon Lady', a term that has stuck since. She worked in close collaboration with similarly vocal India's Environment Minister Kamal Nath and with representatives of Brazil who hosted the Earth Summit. Against this combination an equally formidable United States representative, the State Department's Stephanie Caswell, led the developed countries in the forestry negotiations.

Consultations on the Forest Principles commenced in December 1989. We in New Zealand approached the discussions confident that we had the best of both worlds in our unique situation: protection for natural forests through legislation while planted forests met all our wood needs. An experienced negotiator, David Payton of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led our delegation backed by representatives of other

government agencies such as the then Ministries of Forestry, Agriculture, and the Environment, and delegates of the forest industry.

But it did not take long after the negotiations commenced for us to realise that selling our position was not as easy as we expected. After New Zealand made its opening statement, the Dragon Lady tore into us comparing forest plantations to 19th century cotton and sugar cane plantations that used slave labour and exploited developing countries. Such a dramatised assertion, though patently untrue, we feared had the potential to undermine the message of sustainability of plantation forests. However much we explained the difference between the two it did not seem to make any impact on the G77 position.

We commenced negotiations with a few disadvantages. First, we did not have any material to display the success of our dual forest management since we never envisaged such a need. Secondly, unlike the other 116 countries that were represented at the Earth Summit by a head of state or head of government, New Zealand was represented by the Minister for the Environment. This was a handicap because issues that the officials could not agree on were referred to the high-level segment. A Prime Minister at the top table would have helped in representing our position more forcefully.

As the negotiations were spread over a period, the government and the industry collaborated to produce a video that explained the New Zealand position. The video was shown on the sidelines of the meetings at every opportunity, which was one of the very useful collaborative actions that helped to explain our situation to the rest of the world.

Plantations vs planted forests

It was also at that juncture that we realised the word 'plantations' might have unintended adverse connotations. Following deliberations with stakeholders it was agreed to adopt the term 'planted forests' in place of plantations to avoid confusion. This may seem an insignificant change, but it was not. In a world with rampant competition for markets, the ability to distinguish our planted forest from crops such as sugar and cotton could separate exploitation from sustainability. In the harrowing negotiations on the Forest Principles there were several participants who argued against it and New Zealand had to fight all the way to adopt the term.

The Earth Summit concluded, adopting without a vote, the Forest Principles and several other declarations. But that was not the end of the story. The Earth Summit set up the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) to follow up on more than 280 proposals emanating from the Forest Principles and Chapter 11 of Agenda 21. The process continues to this day in different incarnations.

The Earth Summit led to four main developments whose focus was implementing its proposals at the ground level. These included:

1. The main successor body, the IFF, to implement the proposals emanating from the Earth Summit.
2. Other international agencies incorporating UNCED outcomes in their own programmes, e.g. the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO).
3. The birth of a number of voluntary processes to find ways to implement the proposals, e.g. criteria and indicator processes such as the Montreal Process.
4. The emergence of a number of certification schemes for sustainable forest management.

By that time the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which had played the lead role at the Earth Summit, ceded responsibility to the Ministry for Forestry, which was accountable for the subject. (This later merged with the Ministry of Agriculture, and still later became the Ministry for Primary Industries.) Allocating resources to service the plethora of new processes was difficult for a small government agency, yet the Ministry for Forestry ensured involvement in most of them, recognising the need to cover all bases since they tended to feed on each other.

In spite of the success the video made for the UNCED process, our position remained vulnerable for another major reason: we had an enemy within our own camp. In the UN negotiations the western group of countries belong to either the European Union or the Western Europe and Other (WEOG) group. For some reason, Australia and New Zealand are also corralled into this group. WEOG members included the United States, Canada, Norway, Japan and a few others. While all other WEOGs agreed with the New Zealand position, one country vehemently opposed the position we were promoting for planted forests – Canada.

Canada and New Zealand were parties to all four processes noted above and were on the same page on all other matters. The disagreement on this issue tended to strain our relationship and impact on the thrust of our argument. The irony was that by this time the original dissidents, the Group of 77 and China, had more or less accepted our position.

The issue came to a head at the World Forestry Congress (WFC) held in Antalya, Turkey in 1997. The Congress is the largest and most significant gathering of the world's forestry sector held every six years under FAO sponsorship. It aims to create awareness, and to review and formulate new approaches to technical, scientific or policy actions within the forestry sector. The theme that year was 'Forestry for Sustainable Development', which was ideally suited to launch the

message on the role of planted forests in sustainable forest management. We were aiming to use the opportunity to achieve the consensus of the widely representative group.

Unfortunately within the large audience there was the one dissenting voice of Canada. Several participants as well as the chairman of the session made every effort to obtain unanimity for the resolution, but the unrelenting objection remained. The situation was worrying. The Canadian position permeated wider fora where it was represented, which threatened to torpedo our pursuit of a global consensus on the role of planted forests in sustainable forest management. All efforts to win them had so far failed.

During one of the sessions of the UNFF I invited the head of the Canadian delegation to a one-on-one lunch meeting and that brief meeting changed everything. It brought to light that the Canadian government felt our thrust promoting the role of planted forests for sustainable forest management tended to sideline sustainably managed natural forests. This was important for Canada, which relied heavily on such forests for timber production. New Zealand never intended to impinge on the right of another country to utilise its sustainably managed forest resources. All we had to do was to recognise both planted and sustainably managed natural forests playing a role in sustainable forest management. It took some more time to clear the agreed wording, but the understanding reached at that brief meeting was win-win for both countries. It brought home the fact that many policy decisions are being made due to misunderstandings which could be easily resolved through better communications. Since then, we were able to promote the message of sustainable forest management through planted forests unhindered.

It was a landmark achievement, but we were not able yet to make it mainstream. For that we needed broader endorsement by all stakeholders. The ideal way to address the issue was holding a meeting in New Zealand, which would allow them to observe our forest management first hand, but holding such a conference was prohibitive in terms of cost. Such a meeting would need the participation of developing countries as well as relevant NGOs. To ensure their participation travel and accommodation costs had to be met. In addition, the need for interpretation into at least two other languages and other costs could add up to around half a million dollars. Hence we had to either flag it away or look elsewhere for funding so we tried for the latter.

It is in instances like this that personal relationships become important. We discussed the issue with colleagues from other countries at the margins of international meetings and were successful in persuading them to contribute resources. Eventually we were able to obtain financial support from Australia, Canada, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and ITTO, and technical co-operation from

CIFOR, FAO and IUFRO. Argentina, Chile, Malaysia and South Africa as major developing country planted forestry nations also joined in as sponsors. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry underwrote the funding which finally allowed us to hold the meeting.

The conference 'Role of Planted Forests in Sustainable Forest Management' was held in Wellington in 2003 with these main objectives:

- To promote the role of planted forests and identify ways to maximise their contribution to global sustainable forest management.
- To build consensus through informed dialogue among major interest groups.
- To support the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) in implementing its work programme.

The UN Forum on Forests unanimously approved the report of the meeting (see www.un.org/esa/forests/pdf/cli/report-nz-plantedforests-sfm.pdf). Thanks to the Dragon Lady raising the issue, it now provides an undisputed platform to promote New Zealand planted forests in the international arena. It was indeed a dream come true.

Montreal Process

Another important outcome of the Earth Summit was the launching of several national and international programmes to measure progress toward sustainable forest management. The most comprehensive and potentially far-reaching of these programmes are the regional and international initiatives, which now involve more than half the countries in the world. The Montreal Process, to which New Zealand belongs, is one of those international initiatives and is geographically the largest, encompassing most of the world's temperate and boreal forests.

The Montreal Process criteria and indicators consider sustainable forest management in a holistic way, taking into account all forest goods, values and services. It had its beginnings in a meeting of a group of us from 10 countries that came to be known as the The Montreal Process Working Group (MPWG) and which met in a garage in Ottawa in 1994. The Group agreed on a framework of criteria and indicators that provide member countries with a common definition of what characterises sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests. Getting in at the formative stage allowed us to ensure our interests were adequately represented in the Montreal Process.

Criteria and indicators are a powerful tool to measure progress in implementing sustainable forest management both at the macro and micro levels. Since inception, the FAO has been producing annual reports on the global forestry situation on the basis of the seven criteria used by criteria and indicator processes. Several countries produce country reports on a similar basis. The Ministry for Primary Industries has also produced

the New Zealand report. Dr Tim Payn of Scion has played an important role in revising and updating Montreal Process criteria and indicator reporting by chairing the Montreal Process Technical Committee since 2003.

Certification

The planted forest industry in New Zealand is generally considered an environmentally friendly land use providing for maintenance of water quality, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and recreation. These are underpinned by various codes of practice and accords entered into by stakeholders. Yet in the early stages we did not have a mechanism to reflect in the market place environmentally friendly and socially and economically responsible forest management at the management unit level. This was necessary for consumers to recognise well-managed forests as the sources of responsibly produced wood products. The gap was filled by the emergence of the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1993, shortly after the Earth Summit.

Once again New Zealand has been quick to adapt to the need. Its first FSC certified forest came to being in 1998 and at present over a million hectares of forest are under FSC certification. The industry is also continuing

to study alternate certification systems such as the Pan European Forest Certification Scheme.

Conclusion

It is not possible to document in a brief account like this all the different informal contacts that have contributed to the outcomes achieved for New Zealand in international negotiations relating to sustainable forest management over the decade following the Earth Summit. What it has attempted is to provide a gist of the background to the key gains that have been made. A major strength of the forestry sector is its willingness to adopt several of the significant developments that emerged from the Earth Summit. It is hoped that this account helps it to better appreciate some of the landmarks in this country's progress towards sustainable forest management and use them for the benefit of future generations.

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