

Forestry policy – what role should the public have?

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Abstract

The New Zealand Forest Policy project is aiming to develop a policy that will be acceptable to the government and will also be acceptable to future generations. The present focus of the project is on the economic and environmental benefits that forestry provides, but many people working in forestry feel that the public and politicians have very little understanding of the sector at present. Historically people tended to live and work in rural areas and so the public had an understanding of forestry, but now the majority of the population live in urban areas. It is therefore important to get their ideas and views about forestry, not only so the forestry policy being developed can benefit from them, but also to increase the public's understanding and support for forestry. A forestry policy should not just relate to commercial plantations.

Importance to economy

There is no doubting the importance of the forestry sector to the New Zealand economy given that it generates an annual gross income of around \$5 billion, which represents some 3% of this country's GDP, and it directly employs around 20,000 people. Wood products are also New Zealand's third largest export earner – behind dairy and meat. This has all been attained by past and present professional foresters whose achievements are recognised globally, and this economic activity is largely obtained from the 1.5 million ha of mainly radiata pine forests (5% of land area). Natural forest covers 6.4 million ha (24% of the land area) and a further 10% of the land area is in other forms of indigenous vegetation, including regenerating forest (scrubland).

There are plenty of opportunities ahead, such as the need to plant more trees to make further economic contributions to New Zealand's economy and to help mitigate climate change. There are also challenges, such as health and safety for people working in the sector, rural infrastructure improvements and erosion on the steeper slopes.

Absence of a national forestry policy

Most countries have a national forestry policy, but the absence of one in New Zealand following the changes to the sector in 1987 when the Forest Service

was abolished became increasingly noticeable. In 2014, there was a feeling amongst a number of professional foresters that one was required to identify the way ahead for the sector and to highlight the sector's existing and potential contributions. The initial good work of the 'instigator' group of professional foresters has subsequently evolved into the New Zealand Forest Policy Project. For a successful outcome, such a project must produce a forestry policy that is acceptable to the government and will stand the test of time by being acceptable to future generations.

Focus of the NZIF forestry policy being developed

From what I have read, now being a resident on the other side of the world, the policy that is developing is mainly going to focus on the economic and environmental benefits that trees can provide. No-one could possibly disagree that these benefits are substantial and extremely important in New Zealand. Yet, in the NZIF Newsletter of 20 June 2016 the President wrote:

Sadly I have come to realise even those we think should be informed (MPI, Ministers, other land based sectors) know very little about forests and their benefits, and because they know very little it is easier to ignore us. In general the public understand forests even less, and even when they are walking through them they do not think about them at all.

Although the economic and environmental benefits are very important to the country, these benefits are indirect and don't really touch the daily lives of New Zealanders, apart from those working in the forestry sector.

NZIF members cannot be expected to take on a major public education campaign as it has neither the money nor the people to do that. However given the apparent disconnect, how can the Institute be sure that the forestry policy it is developing will be acceptable to the government and that it will stand the test of time?

Time to listen and act

Most foresters enjoy the jobs they do and focus on 'getting the job done', and rightly pride themselves in doing it professionally and efficiently. Many possibly

feel they do not have much time to look more widely because they don't have much spare time even to relax and spend time at home. This has the potential for professional foresters and other people working in the sector to talk to each other during their daily work and at professional meetings. So the sector, as in other countries, has a tendency to 'preach to the converted', which is enjoyable, reassuring and professionally worthwhile. This can result in sudden unforeseen situations.

In the UK in the early 1980s there was a big demand for land suitable for planting trees, stimulated by the tax incentives that existed then. Many foresters felt they were doing their job and what they were doing was in line with the UK's forestry policy at the time to encourage woodland expansion. The scale of the land purchases, and the types of land being purchased, began to alarm an increasing number of farmers and conservationists – and subsequently the public. Well-known personalities that were appearing on television screens such as Steve Davis, Alex Higgins and Terry Wogan all legitimately purchased land for tree planting in the Flow Country in the North of Scotland, a large area of peatland and wetland that was the largest expanse of blanket bog in Europe.

Conservation organisations, concerned about the loss of conservation value of the area, used publicity about their fame and wealth to point out that these people were benefitting from tax relief. In 1988, this and other national publicity about the biodiversity and conservation damage resulted in the tax incentives (as they existed then) being withdrawn, which came as a major shock to the many people working in the sector who felt they were 'just doing their job'. If foresters had listened earlier to the conservation concerns and adjusted the then forestry policy, this set-back might have been avoided. It subsequently took almost 20 years to re-build trust and mutual respect between the conservation organisations and the forest sector – and to a more limited extent the farming community.

Forestry aids rural economic development and communication

Go back far enough in western countries and people used to live and work in, or very close by, forests whether they were broadleaved or coniferous. Most of the population lived in rural rather than urban areas; everyone knew and understood (not scientifically) what products and benefits forests provided. If they didn't know from first-hand experience what was happening, the information probably spread locally by word of mouth. Over the centuries the people who used to live in rural areas gradually moved into towns and urban areas. The knowledge of what went on in the forests and woods diminished; many probably became more concerned with the products made from trees to build their houses rather than how or where these products came from.

The other major changes that started to emerge in parallel, but at a different speed, were the opportunities for new technology, productivity and cost minimisation. This gradually resulted in fewer people being required to work in the forest sector. We are now at a situation where modern forms of transport mean that people working in the forest industry do not even need to live in rural areas. The result is that people living in rural areas, let alone urban people, may not even know what is going on in the forests and woods today. The informal communication link that existed long ago (and was taken for granted) no longer exists in many western, and in a number of developing, countries. This poses professional foresters with a major challenge.

Forestry policy coverage

Should a New Zealand 'forestry' policy just relate to commercial forests, or should it cover other situations where trees are growing in this country? Those involved in delivering the New Zealand Forest Policy Project may be being pragmatic in focusing on commercial forests in developing a 'forestry' policy given the abolition of the NZ Forest Service in 1987. In doing so they are potentially seriously limiting the understanding and perception of what others outside the profession think about forestry, and to a greater or lesser extent what they think about professional foresters. A forestry policy can be designed to influence the thinking of one particular government department, but one designed to stand the test of time needs to ignore present government departmental structures, which after all can change over time. A well-designed, comprehensive forestry policy can help to indicate that present government departmental structures may not be the most logical, or effective, and so may help to bring about change in the longer term.

Why shouldn't the forestry policy look wider than commercial forests and cover trees in all situations in New Zealand? Why shouldn't the forestry policy cover indigenous woodlands (23% of the land area), protection areas, as well as trees in conservation and urban areas, to name but a few other situations? If it doesn't, what image does it offer of professional foresters to those outside the profession? It may be that the NZIF has no full members who are involved in managing trees in situations other than commercially managed coniferous woods. If it doesn't, perhaps there is an opportunity to widen its membership!

Are past ways still the best for developing forest policies?

Up until about the last 30 years or so, forestry policies in almost every developed or developing country in the world were written by professional foresters often employed by a government department. This tended to be because there were usually some state-owned forests. Perhaps there was also a feeling or perception amongst professional foresters that they were also the best technically qualified and best placed to write a forestry

policy for the country, particularly as they or a colleague may have personally visited many of the national forest areas in the course of doing their job.

In the past, the forest sector was reasonably self-contained and so professional foresters didn't need to think much about how the sector's activities impinged on other ones. Even if some feel that this is still the case, it can be brought home to us quite forcibly when the activities and policies of other sectors impinge on forestry. This sort of situation inevitably comes to be perceived as a threat and some might argue provides ample justification for keeping the development of a forestry policy in the hands of professional foresters – so as to emphasise the 'forestry case'. Others outside the profession may simply see it as an advocacy document and therefore pay little attention to it. This narrow sectoral line of thinking overlooks the fact that the policies and activities of other sectors can potentially support a forestry policy and assist in its delivery. This is particularly true with environmental policies such as climate change, water quality, recycling, biodiversity, tourism and low carbon construction policies. Giving other sectors an opportunity to put their ideas forward on a forestry policy may open a dialogue and identify new opportunities. Not all ideas put forward may be acceptable or compatible; it may ultimately come down to a matter of balance, but a forestry policy will be more robust for going through the process.

Is a forestry policy so important that it must be left in the hands of professional foresters because the public can't understand the issues, or can't be trusted, or perhaps both? It would be wrong to assume that the public doesn't have any views on the matter because, for example, most of us as professional foresters have an interest and view about education and health policies although we are not professionally qualified in those

fields. New ideas of how we can best use forests and woods, such as mountain biking and eco-tourism in native woodlands, did not just come from professional foresters. However those sorts of opportunities have greatly strengthened the interest, understanding and support for forestry in the minds of the public in many countries. A small local experience resulting from a conversation between a professional forester and a few local people who wanted to use a forest in a particular way may not be well known, but it could be applicable elsewhere once it gets more widely discussed. The public may have many ideas on how New Zealand's forests and woods could be used, but they have not been asked and there has been no mechanism or opportunity for professional foresters to capture them.

Forest policies are increasingly being developed or refreshed by drawing on the thoughts and ideas of people other than professional foresters. Is this approach appropriate now in New Zealand? Some professional foresters may worry that the public might have views that could limit this country's commercial forestry management and harvesting activities by, for example, imposing restrictions on what they do. The issue of certification comes to mind. Initially it was viewed by many professional foresters, in Europe at least, as adding to bureaucracy and costs. It has undoubtedly done so, but not to the degree many had expected. What was not fully foreseen at the time was that it would end up being such a powerful marketing message to industry and the public that certified wood is a natural product that is independently certified as being sustainably managed, unlike other materials such as plastic, cement bricks and glass.

The challenge for professional foresters is to come out of our sectoral comfort zone and accept that changes could be for the better. New Zealand foresters are very

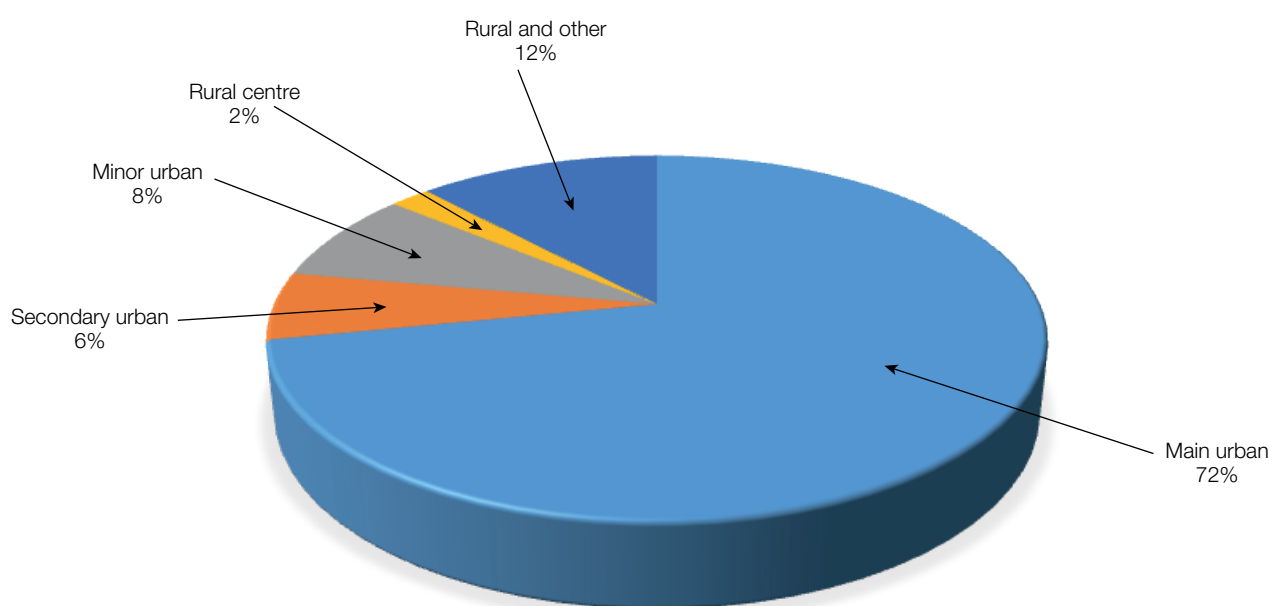


Figure 1: Area of usual residence for NZ population – 2006. Source: Statistics NZ

good at finding technical solutions and embracing technical change in the forest. There seems no reason therefore why they cannot do the same in developing a forestry policy by picking up ideas and thoughts from the public and developing a forestry policy that raises the profile of forests, woods and trees in New Zealand that will stand the test of time.

Political interest

A not very unique or original observation is that politicians are strongly influenced by the views of their constituents. There is a danger that politicians view representatives of trade organisations and professional bodies as a 'single person' when they meet, or have correspondence with them, rather than a large collection of individuals or businesses they represent. The economic contributions that the forestry sector make to the New Zealand economy are impressive and can be quickly and fairly readily appreciated. However they don't compare to the views and feedback of constituents who are enthusiastic about the direct or indirect benefits they gain, for example, from trees in a wide range of situations, whether commercial or indigenous forests or urban trees. An understanding of trees in one situation can open the mind to the benefits of trees in another. This is especially true for young children in schools, who will of course be the people who the NZIF forestry policy is also being designed for.

Where is the population that the politicians represent? In 2016, New Zealand reached a population of 4.7 million. The latest available New Zealand Government statistics on population distribution (2006) show that approximately 78% of the population lived in urban areas as Figure 1 shows.

No major changes in the proportions are likely to have occurred in the last 10 years. Definitions of what an 'urban' area is can vary, and an 'urban' area in New Zealand is a long way from the crowded cities of New York, London, Tokyo or Delhi. The benefits of trees to people living in urban areas, wherever they are, that have been identified have included improved biodiversity and air quality, transforming the appearance of an area, health benefits, improved educational opportunities for children at school, increased climate change resilience, and reduced air temperatures in city centres.

Shouldn't a forestry policy seek to include trees in urban areas, as some or all of these benefits will surely be of relevance, benefit and significance to the needs and interests of people living in New Zealand's urban areas? If so, this will encourage the public to be supportive of trees and be happy to talk about the benefits of trees to politicians. Once the public's attention has been gained it will help to bring about a better understanding of the commercial forestry management of trees and the economic benefits that it is delivering. This will not only be of benefit in obtaining more political support now, but in the future as well.

What are the options?

One option is to just press on and deliver the forestry policy in the way that has been developed by the many people who have voluntarily put a lot of hard work into putting it together. The other option is to test the views of the public, of whom 78% live in urban areas, on what they think are the most important aspects of New Zealand's 'forestry'/trees. This need not be a major polling/survey exercise, although perhaps the project may be able to get a grant towards the cost of doing a limited amount. The selected voluntary participants from the public should broadly reflect the structure of the New Zealand population (just over 50% female), the elderly, the young, school children etc, and the questions should be presented in a structured format. A Facebook-linked electronic survey might be an alternative. The views obtained might not always be what we want to hear, but the results would help those involved in the New Zealand Forest Policy Project to develop one that should broadly reflect the views of the public. The forestry policy should then have a good chance of obtaining the enthusiastic support of politicians and the public, and be relevant for years ahead.

A suitable and very appropriate way to conclude this paper appears to be to end it with a challenge and a statement made by two people who had a wealth of forestry experience covering both New Zealand and globally. The first, the challenge, comes from Jack Westoby, who was not a forester, but became Chief of the Forest Economics Branch of FAO in Rome in 1958 before going on to be Deputy Director of the Division and then Director for Programme Co-ordination and Operations in the Forestry Department. His challenge to professional foresters' thinking was that 'forestry is not about trees; it is about people. And it is about trees only insofar as trees can serve the needs of people' (Westoby, 1967 cited in Leslie, 1987).

The other observation came from Alf Leslie himself, who is known to many foresters in New Zealand. In writing Jack Westoby's obituary that was published in *New Zealand Forestry* in August 1989, Alf ended it by saying we should be grateful that we have his (Jack's) work and words to guide us to recovery from the self-inflicted wounds of obsession with the technical problems of timber production management rather than the social purpose of forestry.

Reference

Leslie, A. 1987. 'Foreword'. In J. Westoby, *The Purpose of Forests: The Follies of Development*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

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