

## ASKING THE OWNERS\*

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In all the current controversy about the destiny of certain indigenous State forests there is a central axiom which provides perspective. It is, quite simply, that the relationship between the State foresters, responsible to the Minister of Forests, and the public is analogous to that between a steward of any estate and the owner of that estate. As the steward consults the owner about what should be done with the estate, so should the Forest Service consult the owners of the State forests —the public — about what they want done with their forests. Of course, they are currently doing so, and to a commendable extent. However, this was not the case twenty years or so ago, for the very good reason that the public were not interested in the management of the State forests. Then the public, if they thought about it at all, accepted that the principal objectives of management were soil and water conservation in the steep highlands and timber production on the easier lowlands. The government and the State foresters proceeded with that tacit mandate.

Since then a wind of changing public opinion has begun to blow. Below the steep protection forests where logging was not permitted, the State foresters had been preoccupied with wood production because it was government policy. They thought that emphasis on wood production was in the public interest and represented the main climate of public opinion. But, in the late sixties and early seventies, public opinion was changing and a growing preservation lobby articulated what many people were feeling, which was that amenity, wildlife and scientific values could and should take precedence over timber production in some lowland State forests.

There was another wind of change, one which had been blowing less boisterously but for much longer, one which came from the quarter of the forestry profession itself. Its force was resentment against the old policy of exploitation, of "creaming" and "cut out and get out". Foresters wanted the timber resources to be renewed after logging so that there could be a yield of timber in perpetuity. This began to be achieved in two ways; by replacing

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the logged indigenous forest with exotic species, or by regenerating the indigenous species. There developed strong public opposition to large-scale conversion of indigenous forest to exotic pines so foresters turned more to the indigenous species, to regenerating rimu and beech for yields of timber which would be sustained.

It is possible, on many sites, to log and regenerate these species without detriment to a range of forest values, as long as the forester is in control of the operation and is able to accord top priority to the well-being of the forest, and as long as the revenue received from the timber is substantial and sufficient to pay for the refined silviculture and environmental safeguards required. Indeed, in the long term, the only justification for working these forests is the sustained production of high value decorative timber. Radiata pine and Douglas fir can meet other timber requirements.

The wind of changing public opinion brought a period of adjustment, a period in which the State foresters began to enquire of the public what they wanted done with their forests, a period of public consultation which is with us still. Different issues were handled in different ways. Where they were not especially complex or controversial, draft management plans were produced and referred to the public for comment. Where issues were complex and controversial, with various interest groups pressing hard for their particular solutions, it became important to introduce objectivity and perspective into the arguments. This was sought by the presentation to the public of a range of management options which formed a gradation between the extremes of complete preservation on the one hand and complete exploitation on the other. It was hoped that polarisation could be reduced and focuses shifted from over-simplified yes/no arguments to consideration of areas of feasibility. Public response could then indicate, as it did in the case of the Southland beech forests, what particular options have the greatest measure of public support. More detailed draft management plans can be drawn up later along such lines and further comments invited. When issues were complex, controversial and universal, it became necessary to consult the public on a general policy level. The Forest Service used the 1974-5 Forestry Development Conference to ascertain the reaction of this widely representative forum to a new management policy for all the indigenous State forests.

But there are problems with public consultation and they must be recognised and allowed for. First, many of the concerned public are not well informed about their forests and the various management options. Did all the signatories to the Maruia Declara-

tion understand fully all the issues involved? Second, public consultation will not necessarily produce a consensus. It may be impossible to get opposing factions to compromise and a political decision may have to be imposed, as at Whirinaki.

A third problem is one of inequity; some owners are not able to communicate their preferences as effectively and as urgently as others. A Takapuna housewife, with little cause or inclination to visit Whirinaki or Pureora Forests, may value highly her lounge furniture of heart rimu; her preference for the management of these forests would be the sustained production of such decorative timber. A hunter from Taupo may place high value on the red deer he takes from these forests and he would be glad of the better access afforded him by the networks of logging roads. A mechanic in Reefton may depend on operations associated with the logging and renewal of nearby beech forest for his livelihood. None of these hypothetical owners would place the highest priority on keeping the forests pristine, in contrast to an owner who opposes any form of management for timber and who supports the preservation lobby. None of them would have the individual political clout of the latter because his preferences are publicised forcefully by a well-organised and effective preservation group. Nor, it must be added, would they have the individual political clout of an owner who is a principal of a company processing indigenous timber, for much the same kind of reason. So develops an element of inequity. Should those who shout the loudest and clearest be the most influential? There is another facet of inequity. Some owners who will be affected by whatever forest management decisions are taken cannot be consulted: future generations. Who can speak for them?

If participatory democracy is to work, public consultation must be made effective by remedying or mitigating these difficulties. Poorly informed people can benefit from concerted public education, which is surely an essential accompaniment of public consultation. The forestry profession and other scientific disciplines could do much more to inform the concerned man in the street about the patterns and processes of the indigenous forest ecosystems, the various management options possible and the consequences of each.

It must be accepted that consensus will not always be achieved and that political decisions will have to be taken. But political decisions can be made more palatable to the disappointed factions if there is a policy strategy which aims to provide, in each large forest region, a balance between preservation of forest in

its pristine state and logging of forest followed by renewal. In practical terms this means adequate provision, in any region, of forest sanctuaries, national parks or similar reserves on the one hand and State forest parks and ordinary State forests on the other. It would obviously be in the best interests of all the owners, because of the extensive exploitation which has already taken place, to accord priority in any region to allocating areas for scientific reservation and wildlife conservation, as deemed adequate by panels of scientists such as the current Scientific Coordinating Committee.

Inequity can best be countered by avoiding precipitate, irreversible decisions about the destiny of forest land. Final decisions should be delayed until all the owners, including the quiet and uncertain majority, have had adequate time to understand what is involved and to communicate their preferences. Where feasible they should be delayed for decades so that the next generation may have a part to play in decisions about the use of their forests which will meet their needs best at that time. The threat of logging in some State forests has induced the preservation lobby to press for their inclusion in national parks. Such concern is their prerogative and as owners they are entitled to state their preferences but a change to national park, or forest sanctuary, status cuts off other options, just as does logging. A moratorium on logging for a specified period would be better than precipitate inclusion in a national park or forest sanctuary. This would enable the most informed and representative decision to be made in due time without cutting off options prematurely. Indeed there is a good case, in especially controversial situations, for a category of State forest, or for that matter any indigenous forest owned by the Crown, which would mean, "No logging or national park reservation just now, final decision later".

There can be no quick and neat resolution of all the issues related to the role and destiny of the indigenous State forests. Time is required for the stewards and the full panel of owners to communicate effectively with one another and to reach the best working relationship. Delay will often be required to keep options open. Final decisions about public land resources are too important to be hurried.