

Tide of public opinion about forestry has turned

Forestry on the back foot

Managed forests and the profession of forestry have been attacked by a diverse array of environmentalists, farmers, planners, school teachers, politicians and a broad section of other influential people over most of the last two decades.

NZ Forestry (Vol.32, No. 1) published a comment by Peter Grant, a research officer for the Maruia Society, in May 1987. He referred to the 341,000 signatories of the Maruia Declaration 1976 which called for the breaking up of the New Zealand Forest Service and petitioned for the preservation of indigenous forests. He made a scathing attack on pine plantations as well, calculating that the return on State exotic production forestry since 1920 was only about 1%.

In the same issue Gerry Horgan provided a good rebuttal which has since been proved correct by the prices being paid for the sale of State forests, but Grant's attack was symptomatic of the much more widely held views of the time that professional foresters were not only ecological Philistines but also incompetent businessmen and disrupters of society.

Almost simultaneously the Minister of Finance was citing the planting of forests as being classical examples of bad Government investments. The then Prime Minister, David Lange, flew over some Cyclone Bola washed-out new plantings on the East Coast and informed the press that trees did not reduce soil erosion either. (See page 21 where Doug Hicks refutes this logic.)

In the town and country planning arena foresters were under attack too. Section 3(1)d of the Town and Country Planning Act 1977, which dealt with matters of national importance, stated: "In the preparation, implementation, and administration of regional, district, and maritime schemes. . . the protection of land having high actual or potential value for the production of food. . . must be recognised and provided for."

This put pro-forestry interests at a disadvantage in district planning from the outset. The disadvantage was compounded by the high proportion of farmers in county councils. At the time most farmers were suspicious about the

adverse effects of forestry on their society, and on their share of the cost of rural infrastructure. Farmers feared some form of forestry take over.

In retrospect it could be argued that the forestry sector made things difficult for itself. At the 1981 Forest Conference the industry set national and regional forest estate targets, but at the same time through a poor public relations performance alienated itself from the people of New Zealand. At a time when we were thinking big, and at a time when public support was vital, the industry failed to involve and work successfully with public interest groups. A backlash through the public's elected local politicians became inevitable.

Moreover at that conference the industry also implied that its interest lay in the poorer quality land and that its needs mostly could be satisfied from land classes 6 and 7.

The result was that many district schemes placed conditions on forestry in rural zones where previously forestry has been allowed as a predominant use. A number of schemes did not provide for forestry on the better classes of land at all.

The tide has turned

There are distinct signs that that tide has turned.

For example, Wairoa, one of the first counties that tried to constrain forestry development, now has a draft scheme which encourages forestry. Hastings District Council expressly excludes exotic afforestation in the rural 3 zone described in its scheme, but has recently gone to great lengths to bend the rules to permit the Seaford partnership to plant on rural 3 land. The Hastings District Council is currently reviewing its scheme and will certainly be liberalising the controls on forestry development.

The new Resource Management Act which came into effect on October 1, 1991 with its emphasis on sustainable land use and its focus on the effects of land uses rather than the land uses themselves, may foster rural planning that will be good for forestry.

Two articles in recent daily newspapers have brought home how far public opinion among farmers and environmentalists has changed direction.

One of these was an editorial in *Straight Furrow* (of all places) demonstrating that the farming fraternity is now much more kindly disposed towards forestry.

"Return the Trees to the Land" from *Straight Furrow* (July 24, 1991)

The upsurge in interest and activity in trees makes good economic sense in the climate of uncertain farm prices and adds another dimension to income for the farmer.

There is, however, a much more important angle in the philosophy and ecological sense of returning trees to the land. Agroforestry is restoring trees to the land that was originally forest covered.

In hindsight there was a lack of insight in the European development of New Zealand. The pioneers did not understand the delicate balance that often exists between climate, natural vegetation and the soil. The vegetation is adapted to the climate and today even a high school student is aware that the West Coast's dense rain forest in comparison to the open beech forest of Canterbury is simply a reflection of the vast differences in rainfall.

Remove the vegetation buffer between rainfall and the soil and the land suffers. Early New Zealanders should have known better because of the American experience of dust bowls being formed by the over grazing of prairies. Those ecological disasters should have been a warning. Nevertheless, as recently as a couple of decades ago, New Zealand agricultural advisers had a mentality that said farmland should be total grassland. "Trees had no value and competed with the grass. Trees encouraged stock to gather and in turn the growth of barley grass," it was argued.

The new regime of agroforestry represents a new enlightened age in farming. Trees are now seen as enhancing the landscape, as providing essential shelter to stock,

particularly in the summer heat and if planted in succession as providing a substantial and sustained income source.

Another recent article shows that the confrontation between foresters and "conservationists" is well on the way to resolution.

"Conservationists and foresters sign accord" from The Dominion (August 9, 1991)

The timber industry and conservation groups have reached a landmark environmental accord intended to preserve native forest and stop large-scale land clearance for exotic plantations. The agreement emphasises plantation forestry as an environmentally acceptable alternative and supports native forest logging only if it is sustainable and mainly to produce added-value, solid wood products in New Zealand.

Forest owners, who control about 90% of plantation forests, have agreed not to clear areas of five hectares or more and, where practical, to protect areas of 1 hectare to 5 hectares of mature native forest in plantations.

Conservation groups have undertaken to promote the importance of plantation forestry at home and overseas. The accord excludes high Crown land, Crown pastoral leases and Conservation Department land.

Signatories included the Forest Owners, Farm Forestry and Panel Manufacturers associations, the Timber Industry Federation, Forest and Bird, ECO, Federated Mountain Clubs, the Maruia Society, Friends of the Earth and World Wide Fund for Nature. Well known identities such as Ken Shirley, Kevin Smith, Cathy Wallace, Guy Salmond and Wayne Coffey have given speeches applauding the accord.

It is also hard to find anyone these days who would concur with Peter Grant's 1987 view that plantation forestry is a foolish investment, unless you go about it the wrong way. In fact there has been a flush of articles in the press by journalists and investment advisers giving glowing recommendations about radiata pine investment prospects. Some recent examples of these include Frank Pearson in *New Zealand Sunday Times* writing about "Forestry optimism against realism" on July 21, 1991 and MacGregor and Wylie in *The Evening Post* on September 5, 1991 discussing forestry as an attractive retirement investment.

Why has this reversal of public opinion occurred?

Members of the Institute deserve some credit for having kept the light of knowledge flickering during what has otherwise been something of a dark age for the profession.

Trends in commodity prices with export logs remaining firm in contrast to sheep and beef products (see graph) and little likelihood, at least for several decades, of wood supply exceeding demand have helped win support for plantation forestry among rural people.

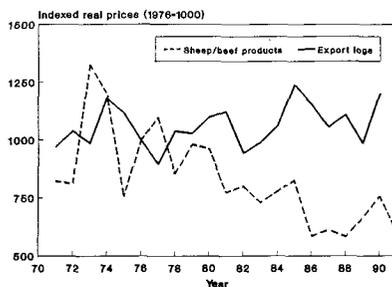


FIG. 1 — Long-term trends in real prices for sheep and beef products, and export logs. Source: Meat and Wool Board Economic Service, Department of Statistics.

So has the introduction of means testing for Government retirement income, and the Ministry of Forestry's publicity campaign through "Trees and Forests Week".

However the real driving force for the change in public attitude has been the broader environmental debates, particularly the issue of tropical deforestation, the greenhouse effect (See Soons P.29) and the desirability of sequestering carbon (See Maclaren P.23). This has resulted in a gradual public realisation that plantation forestry in New Zealand is not only sustainable but can expand profitably and has some merit after all. Of course this has not been just a one-way appreciation of opportunities.

In a recent address Bryce Heard, who is both the chief executive of Tasman Forestry Limited and President of the New Zealand Forest Owners Association, had this to say about what he called the "green wave".

"Only 7.5% of the world's wood is currently plantation grown and this represents a huge opportunity for New Zealand to cash in on the current green wave. There is an awakening to New Zealand's position and the environmental friendliness of its crop within Asian wood buying circles. It was the expectation of this that led to the Tasman Accord in 1989 and the NZ Forest Accord (of August 1991) between the Forest Owners Association and conservation groups. If we are to be genuinely

environmentally friendly and capture the support of the conservationists we need to make some concessions. I would advocate that those concessions will pay off handsomely."

Public attitudes

It is important to appreciate that it was public attitudes that resulted in controls on forestry in the late 1970s and 1980s, not the 1977 Town and Country Planning Act. Similarly, it will be public attitudes that may see a much more favourable consideration of forestry in the 1990s, not the Resource Management Act.

Not only must substantial efforts be put into the education of the public about the benefits of forestry but, like Tasman Forestry Limited, we must continue to listen to the non-traditional views of outsiders to the profession of forestry. Today's non conformist ideas can become tomorrow's mainline thinking. The same ideas can often offer surprising opportunities, particularly to those who are receptive to them early on.

An example for today may be the closer investigation of Greenpeace's objection to large monoculture plantations.

What about future public perception?

The future looks very promising. Forest Industries Training Council, in partnership with the Ministry of Forestry, has embarked on a major project, called "Forestry Insights", to introduce forestry related material into schools. (See *NZ Forestry* Vol. 32 No. 2.) The project will run for four years, covering a range of themes, which broadly will cover conservation and the environment, the human dimension, processes and science, and science, technology and machinery.

Early indications are that sponsorship has been won for about \$2.5 million of expenditure on this over four years, which compares with a national total of \$6.5 million being spent on the introduction of all equivalent industry sector related material being introduced into schools per year. Together with the continued support by individual members of the Institute, and other enthusiasts in our sector, such efforts will vastly improve the information available.

We have to keep working at it of course, but there is no reason why New Zealand foresters cannot look forward to being accorded the deserved status of being wise people. After all our counterparts in Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Japan have already held this position in society for several centuries.

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