
An 'un' natural inclination

Ask any visitor to New Zealand to comment on 'forestry' in this country, and you are likely to find that what strikes people the most is not scale or sophistication of plantation forestry, but rather the lack of 'natural' forestry in New Zealand. Elsewhere in the world, forestry is synonymous with the management of natural forest systems, and a balancing of water, wildlife, recreation, landscape and timber values. The requirements of managing natural forest systems in turn pervades the thinking and approaches of forestry professionals in those countries.

The forestry mind-set in New Zealand is a stark contrast to the global experience. Visitors are most likely to encounter highly-scientific, exotic tree-cropping attitudes, with a self-imposed, narrow focus on volume, quality and financial goals. The narrow focus is not a surprise to anyone working in New Zealand and most would make no apologies for a way of thinking that reflects the reality of forestry in New Zealand today. But before accepting the plantation mind-set completely, there are some interesting questions that should be addressed. In particular, what has happened in New Zealand that we now so easily associate 'forestry' with the requirements of exotic plantations and will this 'un' natural inclination serve us well in the future?

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The origin of the plantation inclination is likely to be found in the corporatisation of the Forest Service. Corporatisation institutionalised a split between plantation and indigenous forests which went far beyond ownership changes. The shifting of indigenous forests, with notable exceptions, to the Department of Conservation for conservation purposes, and plantations to private ownership brought with it other major collateral changes. One change was found in the collective sigh of relief among many forestry professionals as they rid themselves of the trials of indigenous forestry issues, narrowed their focus of activities and simplified the task of producing timber. In a way, it was almost as if the plantation inclination represented a great escape.

Corporatisation also changed career opportunities, and training and education

needs. The number of people working in forestry in indigenous forests declined after the split, and those who remained with the Department of Conservation had very different job descriptions. At the same time as forestry in indigenous forests was shrinking, career options in exotic forestry were expanding and most forestry jobs came to be associated with exotic plantation forests. Funds for 'forestry' activities grew quickly in the exotic plantation sector and declined in the indigenous sector, increasing opportunities for research and management in exotic forestry and reducing them in indigenous forestry.

The combined effects are that most people in forestry in New Zealand have come over the last 10 years to associate their work, and forestry at large, with exotic plantations. The question of how well the 'un' natural inclination will serve New Zealand in the future has many facets which can be dealt with in terms of international, national and local effects.

At an international level, the plantation inclination is reflected in New Zealand's treatment of international forestry issues as being largely related only to plantations. From carbon sequestration to certification, New Zealand's stance involves a segmentation of forest types and initiatives that relate almost exclusively to its plantation forest estate. For example, New Zealand's international sustainable forestry initiatives are based on the promotion of the Principles for Sustainable Plantation Management. It is not clear whether other countries will accept this type of segmentation of forests, and if not, how the Principles will serve indigenous forestry, or whether we will be required to produce yet another set of principles for indigenous forests.

At the national level, the RMA is recreating the links between indigenous and exotic forestry, making it increasingly difficult to separate the two. Under the RMA, plantation development where there is existing indigenous vegetation generally requires definitions of indigenous forests to be developed, and provision for protecting existing indigenous forests. Quiet discussions can also now be heard speculating on an increasing requirement for 'natural' features to be incorporated into exotic forestry, taking it closer to the model for indigenous forestry. This includes landscape considerations such as coupe size, visual buffers or pseudo-natural effects, and provision for recreation or wildlife. In the context of these types of

changes, indigenous forestry has the potential to maintain skills and perspectives which can deal with these types of factors.

At a local level, there are large areas of existing indigenous forest on private land, yet most of our resources and energy are being directed into exotic forests being planted on pastoral land. Rather than a mosaic of productive forests, this leads to the two solitudes — neglected remnants of indigenous forest and intensively-managed exotic plantations. The neglect belies the emphasis on sustainability we find elsewhere in forestry.

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So where does this leave us? It would be at our peril to ignore the potential of indigenous forests to influence the success of plantation forestry or to downplay the importance of the broader view that is captured by indigenous forestry. What is also important is that indigenous forestry has the potential to flourish rather than be a millstone if it is brought back into the mainstream of how we think about forestry. Examples of this potential can be found in the activities of the indigenous forestry unit at the Ministry of Forestry and Timberlands West Coast. These two organisations are our remaining links to indigenous forestry, and between them have been providing guidelines for sustainable forestry, conducting wood technology research and developing markets. Unfortunately, they find that they are increasingly on the outside of what constitutes forestry in New Zealand today.

What we need is a change of heart about what constitutes 'forestry' in New Zealand. Indigenous forestry needs to be taken out of the 'too hard' basket and returned to a core part of what forestry is all about. The change is one of attitude. Supporting the NZIF Indigenous Forestry Policy or taking steps to get reacquainted with indigenous forestry are but small steps in returning indigenous forestry back to the mainstream. Let's return to our natural inclination.

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