

We must be better advocates

Wink Sutton

Most of us who became forestry professionals did so because we loved trees and forests. When most of us chose the forestry profession we never expected that the public perception of the forestry professional would change from that of being seen as forest conservationists to one of being seen as advocates for forest destruction.

We are fortunate in New Zealand that because of the vision of past professional foresters we have successfully created a plantation resource that provides most of the nation's wood as well as supplying an expanding wood export industry. The success of our plantation forestry industry however appears to have been to the detriment of the management of our indigenous forests. Although the New Zealand plantation forest industry (which is based on introduced tree species) is not without its critics, a far higher proportion of the public are highly critical of any wood harvesting in our indigenous forests. The public (and much of the media) equates wood harvesting (no matter how well done) with forest destruction and loss of habitat for wildlife (especially for birds).

The Labour Government (elected in November 1999) is conscious of this public concern over wood harvesting in indigenous forests. In its first major decision, the new Government stated its intention to stop all selection harvesting in indigenous forests in crown ownership. While most professional foresters are supportive of the responsible regulation of indigenous forests, many are convinced that a total ban on wood harvesting is far too drastic. Many have concerns that it is possible (probable?) that there will soon be attempts to extend the prohibition to all wood harvesting from every indigenous forest in New Zealand.

Not so long ago the forestry profession would have been consulted on this issue, but not now. The government (ever conscious of public opinion) now seeks the advice of others.

What has gone wrong? Why are the opinions of professional foresters no longer respected? Indeed if anyone (even an environmentalist) dares to even hint that limited and responsible wood harvesting is possible they are immediately labeled as supporting forest destruction and the loss of bird habitat.

It seems as if anyone is immediately suspect or condemned if they can be linked in any way to wood harvesting or wood utilisation. It is true that the production of wood was often a major objective of much forest management (including plantations) but as forestry professionals we always have great respect for nature.

Many of us never considered ourselves ecologists, but because forestry is a natural system foresters develop a sound general understanding of ecology. Probably the greatest ecological lesson we learned was the amazing ability of forest systems to recover after the most appalling abuse. In New Zealand the general public perception is that any wood harvesting (no matter how sustainable or

how responsibly done) is permanently detrimental to the forest and its birds. But as all foresters know, responsible, sustainable and limited selection harvesting has little immediate impact and certainly no lasting impact on the forest or its birds. Forests (including the associated wildlife) have a remarkable ability to recover from extreme natural disasters (e. g. fire, major storm damage, volcanic eruptions and even ice ages). Forests and wildlife will also recover (albeit slowly) from mankind's most extreme treatment - the permanent destruction of all forest cover for conversion and permanent use as farmland. Limited selective and sustainable forest harvesting is not detrimental to the forest or the birds that live in the forest. Over the last century there are many successful examples (and in most of New Zealand's indigenous forest types) of forest management where far more radical harvesting systems were tried than in any regime currently proposed for indigenous forests.

Past experience and an understanding of ecological forces may have convinced foresters that limited and sustainable selection logging will not be detrimental to the forest or its birds. However, many of the public, as well as the current Government, are equally convinced that any harvesting in indigenous forest is so detrimental that all harvesting should be stopped. But does it really matter, especially given that the indigenous wood supply is now less than 1% of the New Zealand total wood supply? Yes, there are good reasons for concern.

Possibly the greatest concern is the distraction created by the claim that even responsible and limited wood harvesting on a small proportion of our indigenous forests poses a major threat to the forest and its wildlife.



Plantations can provide for most of New Zealand's wood needs

The distraction is that it takes focus away from what are real threats to the forest and wildlife, namely possums, predators such as rats and stoats and even introductions such as wasps. Any threat posed by responsible wood harvesting is minimal in comparison with the damage caused by the introduced fauna. The cost of any effective control of introduced fauna is massive (\$50, 100 or 200 million?) and the cost will almost certainly be ongoing. It would be unwise to always expect Governments to pay for pest control. That financial burden could be reduced if Governments gained some financial return from the forests. Responsible and sustainable wood harvesting could pay some of those costs. Being seen as providing some return would assist Governments in protecting the forest. Indigenous forest that provides no financial return could be seen as in less need of protection than a forest that does provide returns.

It is often claimed that plantations will provide all our wood needs. This presupposes two givens - that our plantations themselves are not at risk and that plantations can actually provide all wood needs. The risk is very small but it exists. The introduction of an insect or pathogen could wipe out radiata pine. As radiata pine accounts for 90% of our plantation resource New Zealand would be in very serious trouble. Having an indigenous forest source of wood could help reduce (albeit in a small way) the huge financial implications of the loss of almost all of our plantation resource.

Plantations can provide for almost all our wood needs but they can not provide all wood needs. There will always be a demand (as in high quality furniture) for special wood qualities that can only come from indigenous forest tree species. We must either supply this wood quality from our own forests or import it from other countries. Most (maybe as much as 80%) of the world's industrial wood comes from indigenous forest (increasingly much of this forest is managed). By not responsibly harvesting our own forests, we are claiming to the world that New Zealand's indigenous forests are very unique, and unlike forests in other areas of the world, are so fragile and our wildlife (especially our birds) incapable of surviving even a most minimal forest disturbance. The ecologist in all foresters knows that both assumptions are incorrect.

The banning of responsible sustainable harvesting in our indigenous forest means that we are ignoring over a century of experience indigenous management. Perhaps even worse, we will quickly lose the skills and the knowledge that we have acquired. The country will also lose any chance to show the world how indigenous forests can be responsibly managed for wood production.

Wood is not only the world's most environmentally friendly and most energy efficient raw material but it is also the only major raw material which is renewable and sustainable. New Zealand may soon lose any ability to demonstrate to the world how some indigenous forests can be managed for responsible wood production. This is tragic. Some of New Zealand's indigenous forest have

much in common with the natural forests of the tropics. Because many tropical countries lack experience in responsible sustainable forest management our experience could be of value. If we prohibit responsible indigenous forest harvesting here we will lose this opportunity.

It is the responsibility of all professional foresters to be far more vigorous and effective in their advocacy of responsible and sustainable use of our indigenous forests.



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