

West Coast advocate and farm forester

Ronald Aitken Ferguson 1925-2003

Ron was a fourth generation West Coaster who took great pride in his Membership of the Institute. As a farm forester he changed the southern entrance to Greymouth from gorse to radiata pine over a span of nearly three decades.

Ron was a roading contractor, a gold miner and a forester. Most of all he was always a gentleman who fiercely fought for the good of his region. He was an avid reader of the "New Scientist" and self taught in natural sciences; he fondly used the Latin names of plants and animals. He was an avid letter writer, contributing to the local newspaper until his last days.

As a roading contractor he knew every State forest on the West Coast. He was part of the team that connected the State Highway between Lake Paringa and Haast through formidable terrain in atrocious conditions, recognised as one of New Zealand's major engineering feats. He led the tractor train which extended an access track through Cascade forest to the Pyke River via the coastline in the late 1970s.

In 1970 Ron, with his brother Mackley, took over 1040 ha of leasehold land owned by Marist Brothers at the south end of Greymouth. It was cutover podocarp hardwood forest with a periphery of old man gorse. Being owners of a construction company the Ferguson brothers saw an opportunity to use some of their 40 staff and heavy earth-moving equipment situated next door during slack periods in the construction season. A plywood factory and sawmill were situated 3 km to the south and a port 3 km to the north.

Use of sheep and cattle to control weed growth in the early years and timely tending of stands near the highway and county road provided an excellent example of management for other farm foresters to follow. Ron greatly valued the helpful support of Forest Service employees. He was a great admirer of the Department, both for its structure and its people.

As a strong advocate for service to the community Ron unerringly promoted the governance maxim, "of the people, by the people, and for the people". Ron willingly gave his all to being involved in debates, representations and petitions to enhance the viability of the West Coast community. An example of this he articulated at the plenary session ending a week long Seminar on West Coast Forests and Forestry mid 1977. Native Forests Action Council President Guy Salmon gave an impassioned plea for reservation of all the Crown podocarp forests. "Give us the podocarp forest and we



will give you the beeches," he pleaded. Ron jumped to his feet and replied, "Mr Salmon, you ask us to give you the podocarp forests and you will give us the beeches. Mr Salmon, the beech forests are not yours to give".

In response to demands being made by the environmental movement for reservation of large tracts of indigenous forest, Ron in 1978 established West Coast Futures Inc. Its aims and objects were:

- To promote the contribution of the West Coast to the national well being by protecting and advancing the normal social and economic aspirations of the people of the area as New Zealanders.
- To present New Zealanders with a balanced view of the issues arising from the utilisation, management and conservation of West Coast resources.
- To support elected and appointed Authorities in their functions, making wise use of local resources so as to enable the West Coast to make its proper contribution to the New Zealand economy.
- To undertake, promote, support or otherwise carry out any action or activity necessary or desirable in the opinion of the Association to advance the foregoing objects.

Branches of West Coast Futures spanned Karamea to Haast. In May 1978 West Coast Futures launched a petition seeking postponement of any Government or Departmental decisions on the creation of further reservations in State forests or Crown lands until there had been full resource and socio-economic evaluations prior to inviting public comment on reservation proposals.

On 4 October 1978, the Select Committee recommended to the Government the petition of Ronald Aitken Ferguson and 12,174 others for most favourable consideration, the highest level of recommendation. As a consequence of this petition the Government in July 1982 approved Section One of the West Coast Regional Planning Scheme containing the elements of Ron's petition in dealing with any proposals of national or regional significance to change the use or status of any Crown owned land or water in the region.

Ron's passion for the West Coast and his nuggety tenacity achieved significant improvements for the people of the region.

Ron is survived by his wife Marian, and children Lynda, Janet, Kay and Kim and nine grandchildren.

Gus Buckley & Peter Allan