

PLANTATION FORESTRY: PEOPLE AND CAREERS

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INTRODUCTION

It has been said by such forestry sages as J. C. Westoby and S. D. Richardson that forestry is about people, as much as trees. J. D. Rockell, addressing the Convention of the New Zealand Institute of Public Administration in 1975, said that "People are so much a part of forestry that they cannot be ignored. If forestry is to continue, let alone expand, it must help people to identify themselves with it on a very personal basis."

This emphasis on the importance of catering for people in forestry — and "people" here means both forest users and those who work in the forests — is quite recent, and in this paper I want to discuss how it is likely to affect forestry jobs and careers.

THE PAST

In the past, exotic forests were managed solely for production, and the only members of the public to intrude beyond the "keep out" signs were the occasional hunter and a few intrepid people collecting pine cones for firewood. From the outside the forests seemed dark, gloomy places, and many people held the mistaken belief that they were devoid of both plants other than pines, and birds. As a result, the public generally had little interest in, or enthusiasm for, exotic forests.

People who worked in the forests had little to be enthusiastic about, either. Jobs were usually monotonous and often dangerous, particularly logging. In a paper presented to the Annual General Meeting of this Institute in 1971, Fenton and Terlesk pointed out that all forests and forest industry jobs had accident rates above the average for New Zealand industry as a whole. They also showed that between 1949 and 1970 annual labour turnover rates in State forestry (no figures were readily available from the private sector) were rarely less than 100%, while staff turnover averaged 15%.

On the social side, forestry people had to contend with one-industry towns and villages which generally meant poor social

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services and a lack of job opportunities for other family members.

This failure to give enough importance to people in forestry had two important effects on forestry careers. First, because the exotic forests were not used for recreation, jobs in them were generally limited to the efficient management of forests as units of production. Forestry people had little scope for more creative work, such as landscaping or developing picnic areas and walks that people could enjoy.

Secondly, the public's lack of knowledge about forestry, and the social problems of many forestry towns led to poor relations between the public and forestry people. Few people knew what forest rangers did and even fewer knew the role of the forester. Forestry workers as a whole — foresters, rangers and wage workers — were classed as big, tough and uncouth. This in turn produced a poor career image for forestry and discouraged potential recruits.

NEW ATTITUDES

However, in recent times the attitudes of forest administrators towards people have become more enlightened, and forestry now caters better for the needs of both forest users and forestry employees.

This is especially so with indigenous forests, and is increasingly the case with our exotic forests. The change has partly been in response to pressure from people themselves, and partly from administrators' own revised assessments of people's needs.

The opening up of State exotic plantations for recreation is going ahead rapidly. Entry into most forests is still controlled for fire and safety reasons, but the "keep out" signs have gone, and increasing numbers of townspeople have accepted the implicit invitation to spend some of their leisure hours amongst exotic trees. Changing Whakarewarewa State forest to a State forest park was a recognition of the recreation potential (already partly realised) of this old exotic forest. Private companies have also made worthwhile efforts to provide for people using their exotic forests, and have spent a great deal of money on picnic facilities and rest areas.

The most encouraging aspect of all this is that it is happening not merely in response to specific demands, but as part of the industry-wide effort to plan for people using exotic forests.

A greater concern for people is also becoming apparent on the industrial side of forestry, albeit at a slower pace.

On the accident prevention front, society is at last becoming concerned about the fact that many accidents at work in

which people are hurt, even killed, could be prevented; and management, unions and the Accident Compensation Commission are mounting an all-out attack on the accident rate. Much remains to be done in improving working conditions, however. Labour and staff turnover continues at a high rate, although periods of economic downturn do seem to slow the rate somewhat, and many basic forestry jobs remain so monotonous as to be mind-boggling. Who could blame a labourer for seeking release from the tedium of planting or pruning?

Social conditions of forestry people are improving, too, with better communications and higher living standards. It is often possible now for forestry people to live in towns and cities, so that their families no longer have problems of isolation and lack of access to social services. (The workers themselves, though, may have to travel long distances to the job and this can create other problems for the family unit.)

It follows from this that forestry careers have changed, too. Many forestry people now live in towns and cities, and the "Establishment" in cities like Rotorua has come to acknowledge the role that forestry plays in their economy. This makes a career in forestry more socially acceptable and gives forestry people more opportunities to mix with people outside their own field. In addition, the growing recreational use of exotic forests creates opportunities for job enrichment and provides scope for people with artistic flair to find a satisfying career in landscaping and recreational management and planning.

THE EFFECT ON FORESTRY JOBS AND CAREERS IN THE FUTURE

The 1977-8 training programme of the N.Z. Forest Service states that "a forestry organisation's greatest resource is not land, trees or machines, but people". This is a sound training philosophy and reflects the fact that a real effort is being made in the Forest Service to improve the relationships between people and forestry. On-job training courses, many of them open to private enterprise, are being run by the N.Z. Forest Service to bring the on-job aspect of the people/forestry mix into clearer perspective and spread word of this new philosophy to staff members.

But, to pursue the topic of this panel discussion, how is this philosophy likely to relate to careers available in plantation forestry in the future?

My own view is that there must continue to be careers for professional and sub-professional people trained in biology to manage the forests properly with regard to sound ecological principles. The fact that increasing numbers of secondary

school pupils are taking biological subjects, and that increasing numbers of these people are investigating forestry as a first choice career, indicates that forestry organisations should not have any difficulty in attracting a wide range of people to be trained to manage the biological and production aspects of forests.

But if the philosophy of "people forestry" is to be fully implemented, a range of skills much wider than those needed for basic silvicultural management of forests is required, including landscaping, behavioural science, town and country planning, parks and reserves administration, and personnel management. For example, it could be argued that people forestry should be regarded as a behavioural science, concerned with understanding the vagaries of human behaviour. Professor McKelvey's (1976) study of Ardrey would have to be emulated and expanded by future classes of forestry students.

The question then arises: Should forestry people be given specific post-graduate (or post-certificate) training in specialist fields such as behavioural science, landscape architecture, and so on, or should specialists be recruited from these fields and put through pressure-cooker courses to orientate them to forestry? There seem to be advantages in both courses of action and the decision must be a policy one, taken at the highest level.

However, I predict that the current demand for job enrichment at all levels will produce the forestry generalist, that is, the person trained in forestry but with additional skills. Every effort should be made to see that forestry people receive this additional on-job training in the aspects of "people forestry" they have an interest in or an aptitude for. This should lead to a high degree of job satisfaction.

If such a policy is in fact followed and generalists are recruited, they should, after a certain evaluation period, be given further training in a variety of disciplines with the overall aim of creating highly efficient, interchangeable team performers. This will allow a team approach to problem solving, and should help to avoid over-dependence on key personnel which is often a cause of stress in forestry jobs at present. Obviously such changes require managerial restructuring also.

It is reasonable to expect that people taking forestry careers in future will be more highly educated, better informed, and much more mobile. They will want work which gives them greater responsibility, challenge, and more opportunities, and which is less routine than was often available in the past. The broader scope of forestry jobs and the better

career structure outlined above should meet these requirements and therefore make a career in forestry appealing to a wide cross-section of school-leavers.

However, I would like to conclude on a more cautionary note. In 1976, John Knibbs in an article in *Management Services* which looked at the effect of change on the future of the Health Service in Britain, noted that in periods of rapid change organisations have difficulty in generating new and appropriate approaches to problem solving. In such times, when managerial creativity is most needed, it is less likely to be present within an organisation as its members will be preoccupied with their own survival and security, and will therefore take fewer risks in their approach to managerial problems. Now forestry is a rapidly changing profession and presumably the organisations within the forestry sector are changing rapidly as well. Any tensions, insecurity or ill-feeling within an organisation are usually transmitted in some way, deliberately or accidentally, to prospective applicants for positions in that organisation. Forestry organisations, if they are to continue to attract school-leavers of high calibre, need to exude an atmosphere of enthusiasm and vigour. Therefore the best way for a present-day forest administrator to make a contribution to people and careers in future plantation forestry is to foster a secure, yet creative and vigorous, working environment so that present staff can act as effective recruiters for the future.

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