

# Global forest interactions

## Active opposition to the importing of tropical timbers

Four project X environmental activists unbolted balau handrails and steps at Frank Kitts Park and left them on the Wellington City Council's front steps last September to draw attention to our 'double standard'. They claim that while New Zealand native timber is now protected by restrictions on harvesting and export there are no barriers to imports of wood like Malaysian balau cut from precious tropical forests. Since then rainforest activists have chained themselves to logs outside a Lower Hutt timber yard and hung banners and revved chainsaws outside the Wellington headquarters of Mitsubishi, a company they claim is involved in rainforest destruction.

## Rebuttal by the Timber Importers Association

This activity has outraged the New Zealand Timber Importers Association (NZTIA).

Bruce Nimmo, President of NZTIA, said recently:

"Yes, the tropical rainforests of the world are being depleted. The problem is most severe in the countries with the greatest population pressures and the lowest standards of living. However, forestry is only a minor cause of the depletion. Slash and burn agriculture and the use of wood for fuel account for 90% of deforestation.

"Malaysia is the country from which most of New Zealand's small volume of tropical hardwoods are imported and that country has a comprehensive plan for conservation, recreational use and sustainable production of timber. Specific areas are defined and managed accordingly.

"The balau timber used by Wellington City Council at Frank Kitts Park is a fast-growing tropical species and was sourced from sustainably managed forests in Malaysia. If properly managed, these forests will last forever. Reforestation is a growth industry worldwide.

"Contrary to the assertions made by the rainforest activists, the New Zealand Government has been a strong advocate for tropical rainforest conservation to the Island Nations of the Pacific and the countries of South East Asia, and provides practical support and research through the Tropical Forestry Unit at

the Forest Research Institute in Rotorua.

"New Zealand was a prime mover of the Langkawi Declaration at the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. This declaration was a commitment individually and collectively by the countries of the Commonwealth to promote and fund conservation and sustainable management practices in tropical rainforests of Commonwealth countries.

"NZTIA also says New Zealand is a member of the United Nations FAO Tropical Forest Action Plan Committee. There are many New Zealanders providing constructive and practical assistance in tropical rainforestry research and field units both in New Zealand and overseas."

## The inept application of the forestry policies of tropical countries undermines the NZTIA rebuttals

On the surface of it, the NZTIA have a technically sound rebuttal which I would accept if I had not visited harvesting operations in Sabah in 1989. I was there on a three-month FAO consultancy project which was largely a desk job. The working plans and most of the literature at the Head Office in Sandakan revolved around the finer details of sustained yield management but out in

the field I found high lead logging was destroying the prescribed residual seed trees. Talking about this to local professionally trained foresters, I found that poor re-establishment of forests was widespread because of poor logging practices and commercial requirements.

In the August 1990 issue of the International Union of Societies of Foresters Alf Leslie provides a philosophical resolution to these conflicts and the rest of this editorial draws heavily on those ideas.

## Failure in the execution of policies does not mean the policies are failures

There is a defective logic which identifies failures in the execution of policies as failures of the policy. The old adages about "shooting the messenger" and "throwing the baby out with the bath water" simply reflect how common and universal it is. Forestry is far from immune. The dismissal of classical silviculture in tropical forestry is a clear instance of basically sound principles being discarded because of faulty interpretation and inept application and forestry has become a victim as well.

Almost everywhere now forestry and foresters are under attack by environmentalists or accountants and occasionally by both. More often than not it is the implementation of policies rather than the policies themselves which are at fault



High lead logging in Luajong, Sabah, Malaysia. Typically after logging is finished none of the prescribed *Dipterocarp* residual seed trees with 60 cm or greater dbh are left. In 1989 stumpage was over \$US 100/m<sup>3</sup>. (It will be greater now.) So there are also strong commercial pressures not to leave prescribed seed trees behind. New Zealand safety inspectors would be horrified too. Usually workers do not bother with helmets or boots.

but the attacks invariably have been directed at the policies. Multiple-use management in the developed world and forestry for economic development in the developing world are cases in point. Although they have, in fact, rarely been tried well or even at all, the failure to live up to the promise has led to them being dismissed, out of hand, as wrong. Unfortunately the attacks are mounted with more fervour than accuracy, and so they are wide open to counter-attack at their several points of technical weakness. Naturally enough this is where the main effort on the forestry side of the dispute has gone. The "unfortunately" in the sentence above simply registers the fact that these technically superior counter-attacks have not even been able to hold the line.

#### **What is the message for New Zealand Forestry?**

Something must be wrong. If the attacks on the environmental and accounting fronts are effective in spite of their technical weaknesses while the counter-attacks are ineffective in spite of their greater technical validity, then the technical points cannot be important points in the issue.

We know that there are some awesome gaps in our knowledge base for managing forests for multiple use and even for some single-use purposes. Surely then the more progress we make in filling them the less vulnerable we are to criticism on technical grounds and the more capable we are of exposing fallacious criticism. The case for more research, therefore, makes itself. But with technical competence no great asset in the forestry-environment debate and technical naivety no great handicap, what is the point?

#### **Specific purpose forests rejusified?**

The attacks from the environmental side arise primarily from the fact that the forests are wanted as forests; any role they may have as a source of wood, especially industrial wood, is secondary at best. From the accounting point of view, on the other hand, forests are seen purely as a means of generating income; if the nett income is not highly positive then the forests are not wanted at all. The practice of forestry to meet the first view would obviously be different from the practice of forestry to meet the second.

At first sight such mismatched views have nothing in common. But they do have. Both lead to the same conclusion that wood production must be confined to plantations single mindedly devoted to that purpose alone. Accidental as the alliance is, the combined effect is forcing the profession out of the forests and away from the practice of forestry as

many in the profession see it - multiple-use management with wood as one of the uses. But what is wrong with that? Plantations could, after all, meet virtually all of the world's wood needs from a land base of little more than 10% of the present area of forest in the world. The remaining 2700 million hectares of forest

would be more than enough to provide all of the necessary non-wood products and services and still allow a substantial area to be released for agriculture.

**Hamish Levack**  
Editor

## **Let's stop doing it on the cheap**

Foresters do it on the cheap. I began wondering about this at my first forestry conference many years ago. It was held at a ski resort. It was a beautiful place. The problem was that it was the off-season and there was no snow. There was a great view from the top of the lift on top of the hill, but we had to walk down. It would have been much more fun to ski. But it would have also been more expensive. I was told that most foresters couldn't justify the cost during the peak season.

The point was brought home to me in a recent joint conference between foresters and pulp and paper people. The foresters were the poor relations at the conference. We did not have the fancy satchels that were given to all the pulp and paper folks. Our name tags had special colour codes to restrict the functions we could attend. It is true that we paid a bit less to attend the conference. However, that is what our organising committee had decided would be best to attract the maximum number of our members. We were "doing it on the cheap".

There were both forestry and pulp and paper exhibits at the joint conference. The forestry exhibits were typical for forestry conferences. Content was professional, but they were done on a shoestring and it showed. The pulp and paper exhibits, in contrast, were far more visually appealing and had a greater capital investment.

Why should forestry be that way? Why should foresters play second fiddle to an industry which doesn't even want the material we produce? All the pulp and paper people require is cheap biomass. The only reason paper is made from wood fibre is that it is the cheapest technologically suitable material to come along so far.

We try to promote forest growing by saying: "It only cost \$XX (pick a number as close to zero as possible) to invest in forestry!" Promotions rarely mention the cost of holding and tending, or the opportunity cost of investment. Even if they do, the attempt is to minimise those costs. But forestry is a capital-intensive investment. For example, the capital investment in the forest is at least equal

to that of the pulp mill it supports. And the forest generally has fewer managers. Therefore, each forest manager actually has more responsibility for capital management than the mill managers have! And their training is at least equal to that of the pulp and paper people. So why is there this feeling of poverty?

The problem is one of focus. Most foresters see their job as managing forest land. Production foresters are concerned with wood flows. But neither of these focuses provides any benefit for which there is monetary reward. At best, there is a little benefit in selling wood. But even here, the focus is on price. In any commodity sale, the only person who has any chance of making a reasonable return is the low-cost producer. And given the vagaries in exchange rates, differences in international labour costs, and other factors beyond the forester's control, even with good growing technology and favourable growing conditions, it is impossible to sustain the low-cost position in wood production over the long term. In contrast, the pulp and paper people see their jobs as providing a variety of pulp and paper grades to a variety of clients both at home and abroad. They sell a service. They are rewarded for it and it shows. There is more surplus money in the industry. As a result, their conferences are more fun.

So how do we solve this dilemma? We need to get away from a commodity focus. We need to understand the business of our customers so that we can sell them what they need, rather than what we produce. We need to show them how and why using our products will be the best thing they can do. We need to see our jobs as marketing services rather than just managing resources. While resource management is important, and it is important to be cost effective, we will be rewarded with a premium only if our clients see that we can provide them with something they need and cannot get elsewhere. If we can succeed, price will not be so much of an issue and we will be able to stop "doing it on the cheap".

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