



## Guest Editorial

# The road not taken

John Purey-Cust\*

Craig Potton was invited to speak to the 1994 AGM of the Institute as a member of the public who would present, we hoped, a critical outsider's view of forestry. There is a risk on these occasions of too much navel gazing and self-congratulation, and the right questions do not always get asked.

I was not at the Conference so did not hear him speak, and when I read his paper I was disappointed – nothing profound, nothing profound at all – but on reading it again I begin to see I was wrong.

The detail of some of what he said has caused offence but I do not want to write about that: right or wrong, it is all water under the bridge now. But the main point that he made seems to me to be quite clear and to be, at the risk of gross over-simplification, simply this: that by and large the outside world is not greatly interested in forestry (or, I suppose, anything also beyond its immediate ken) unless and until something is done which gets up the collective nose. Then, if there is enough provocation, people rise up and say “no more of this”. If their view prevails (as it did in the matter of the Beech Scheme), they then turn back to whatever they were doing before and leave those who caused the fuss to get on with their business, hopefully a little wiser, until there is a next time – if there is.

The cover of the November issue of NZ Forestry points to what the next issue may be. A forester might look at that picture of a clearfelling site in the Marlborough Sounds and say “so what?” In technical terms the job looks well done, well laid-out roads, no random tracking or bulldozing, a nice clean site which in a year or so will be green again with the next generation.

The public eye sees only change and devastation: it makes its judgement emotionally on what it sees, but, distrusting emotion, dresses up the argument in the fine clothes of old myths and arguments

which may or may not be true, but which are anyway irrelevant because they are not the cause of discontent.

Here foresters suffer from a disadvantage: in a world of “them” and “us”, we are still “them” while farmers, clearfelling annually, turning rivers as well as pastures green and often having conducted such a holocaust of nature that only the grass grub remains to plead biodiversity, are “us”. Forestry is the faceless corporation, but farming is Uncle Jim, Cousin Kate and Brother Tony. That image is a cross that foresters must bear, not entirely false and one not without virtue if it encourages greater self-examination of what we do.

At a recent meeting of the Forest Owners' Association in Invercargill the point was put that log exports are a serious threat to people's views of forestry: more domestic processing is needed, or we will be seen as having sold the nation's birthright of jobs and income from manufacturers down the river.

No-one can argue with that in principle, but in the three months I have been back in New Zealand I have not heard it mentioned as a criticism of forestry or the forest industry: what I have heard, contin-

ually and from a wide range of people, is disquiet over the extent of clearfelling, almost always directed at the ugliness of the operation and the seeming disregard for the pleasures others get from the landscape they live in or pass through. It is a disquiet that I share.

Now I am sure that the impressions that I have been given are influenced by the fact that I have spent much of that time in Nelson where such things are easier to see than in other flatter parts of the South Island, so either I am being unfair or else forestry in such country bears another unquantifiable cost, which so far we haven't counted.

Be that as it may, clearfellings along main roads and scenic highways and around settlements, clearfellings which seem to go on forever without benefit of explanation or acknowledgement of ownership are not good enough. Forestry has not got where it has, achieved what it has, simply to be dragged in the mud by logging planners whose imagination does not stretch beyond beginning at one end and finishing at the other.

In my travels I saw no signs other than warnings, no explanations, no ownership



Forestry operations – Is this all people need to know? Photo: John Purey-Cust

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claims near where anything is happening. There are no concessions at all to public interest. I spent a night in a large roadside picnic area dating from Forest Service days. The only sign in it is by a tree planted to commemorate an accident victim. Opposite was a very large area of clearfelling and an extremely messy road verge: presumably both cutover and picnic ground are in the same ownership, but no acknowledgement, no explanations. This simply is not good enough.

So what can be done about it? Andrew Ezell made some suggestions last year at many meetings of Institute sections, and his views are summarised in the November issue of our journal. They may be further summarised as "if you don't want to be king-hit, don't lead with your chin".

He argues, convincingly, that, as in the USA before us, foresters have arrived at a fork in the road. Either we take the clear open road, doing what we are doing now but soon tangled in regulation, confrontation and restriction, or we take the more overgrown and uncertain path of discussion and reconciliation of difference before grievance arises. The choice is ours and our past experience should tell us

which road will lead us where we want to go.

If that is not clear enough, he cites two cases in his home country – the Pacific north west and Oregon where confrontational policies of business as usual have resulted in a great reduction of the forest industry, and the south east where cooperative policies of explanation and discussion have had the opposite result.

I have spent the past year in England and often went walking in Forestry Commission plantations there. These are a large part of the accessible public estate land and very popular for all sorts of recreational activities.

But they are also production forests with a dark host of treasury discounters at their heels. Production, both clearfelling and thinning, goes on in the midst of recreation and is not much remarked upon. That acceptance has not come lightly. Every operation, every deviation or closure of a track, has an explanatory sign where you hit it. The operation is explained, alternative routes pointed out, and all is signed by a named officer, together with address and telephone numbers.

This cooperation with the public has borne wider fruit: a government policy to sell off the Forestry Commission was abandoned earlier this year (1994) in the face of strong protest by recreational organisations. I do not know if that decision was good for forestry in the UK, but members of the Commission certainly think so, and it is certainly the result of their efforts to sit well with their neighbours.

Ironically, while our pot simmers, there are mutterings of discontent in corners of the forest industry, that the Resource Management Act constrains certainty, that under it no man knows if he may reap what he has sown.

Setting aside the doubt that certainty has ever existed in this context, the quickest way to remove it in forestry is to carry on as some in the industry seem to be doing, inviting regulation by their disregard of public opinion. Thus do they make the fear self-fulfilling, when in fact the Act offers the choice of roads and destinations that Ezell describes.

The choice is ours.

## The sustainability paradox – an examination of *The Plantation Effect* – a review of the environmental effects of plantation forestry in New Zealand

Colin O'Loughlin\*

### Introduction

A recently published book on management principles outlined how the author's seven-year-old daughter surprised her father after a morning church service when she asked: "What if God is a mouse?" No matter what seemingly logical arguments he put up to refute such a possibility, the young girl, with innocence and enthusiasm on her side, successfully countered with equally logical arguments supporting the possibility that God might indeed be a mouse. After reading Rosoman's review *The Plantation Effect* I was struck by the similarities in the approaches adopted by the author of this review and the young girl. Both assembled their arguments in a logical fashion, both were very selective in the way they used evidence to support their viewpoints and both were

inclined to disregard knowledge which tended to work against their contentions. Furthermore, the focus of the young girl's attentions (the nature of God) and the focus of the Greenpeace review (sustainability) have some commonality – both are difficult to define in quantitative terms. In this comment on *The Plantation Effect* I attempt to provide a view of the ecological and other benefits and disadvantages of the radiata pine forest industry, focussing on those areas where the body of evidence from research and accumulated knowledge and Rosoman's views diverge.

### Plantations and Soils

In debates about forest land-use sustainability and what should be sustained, it seems to me that maintaining and protecting the quality and integrity of the soil mantle should be accorded the highest priority. The general implication in Rosoman's commentary is that the forest

plantation industry is not sustainable, partly because radiata pine forests and forest activities degrade the soil. Rosoman recognises the importance of soil organic matter in storing and supplying water and nutrients and maintaining soil structure and porosity. He implies that organic matter disturbance by a range of forestry practices (root-raking, windrowing, burning etc), the relatively slow decomposition rates and acidic nature of pine litter compared to other forest litter types, the large reliance of the plantation industry on petrochemical fertilisers, the influence of acid soil conditions and of fertilisers on soil fauna and flora and the removal of nutrients in tree biomass at harvesting time, will degrade soil quality and lead to a decline in soil productivity. Rosoman refers to a number of research papers to substantiate his rather pessimistic viewpoint. Some of Rosoman's claims are at least partly supported by research results; others are more dubious. Overall, his com-

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