

The Seventh American Forest Congress – February 1996

W.R.J. (Wink) Sutton

Forestry in the USA is controversial. There are many conflicting pressures. One pressure is for greater conservation of more wildlife and more protection of endangered species. Another pressure is for greater recreational and hunting use. A major pressure is for wood harvest (wood is a preferred raw material because of its renewability, its environmental friendliness, its low energy consumption and its low level of pollution).

To successfully resolve these competing pressures, and to set a new vision the Seventh American Forest Congress was held in Washington, DC from February 21 to 24, 1996.

This national citizens' congress was planned by individuals from environmental and rural development organisations, businesses, universities, and Federal, State and Tribal Governments. It attempted to develop a shared vision for the protection and sustainable management of America's forests.

Each of the six previous forest Congresses marked a major turning point in the nation's policy. The First American Forest Congress in 1882 signalled the shift from exploitation to forest conservation. It laid the foundation for the Forest Service. President Theodore Roosevelt hosted the Second American Forest Congress at the White House in 1905. It articulated the policy that management of all America's forest land – public and private – should be for sustained yield and the protection of watershed and soil productivity. Subsequent Forest Congresses brought together leaders, conservationists, and policy makers to consider the critical forest policy issues of the time. The last Forest Congress met in 1975.

In the consultative stage before the meeting, the Executive Director of the 1996 Congress, Dr William (Bill) Bentley, visited New Zealand and other countries. He had discussions with, and sought input from, Governments, environmental organisations, professional organisations and companies.

Dr Don Mead and I were the only New Zealanders to attend the Congress. Below are my impressions of the meeting.

The Seventh American Forest Congress was like no other gathering I have ever attended. The Congress was the antithesis of what we have come to expect

in the USA. Just on 1600 people from all over the USA (including about 20 of us from other countries) came together for three and a half days to develop a vision for the future of American Forests.

We were each assigned to a table of 10 people. Each grouping was skilfully designed to ensure that it included a wide range of backgrounds, ages etc. The only thing that each person could be assured of was that your table would be most unlikely to include someone you knew or who had similar experience to your own. There were retirees to school seniors, indigenous Indians to foreigners, environmental activists to company CEOs, etc.

My table was typical of most. I was the only foreigner and the only representative of a large forest products company. We had four who came from environmental/NGO organisations, an artist whose husband has a small wood utilisation company, a representative from a land-use lobbyist group in Washington and the rest of us were involved in some aspect of forest utilisation.

'Almost all the congress realised that the issues facing US forestry are very complex.'

At the beginning I had real doubts that such a diverse group could ever achieve agreement on forestry. We began by developing some rules to guide our discussion. We agreed on things such as everyone having the chance to contribute and be heard. We agreed to listen and to respect alternative views.

The process began by each table considering a vision statement that had been extracted from a series of roundtables held throughout the USA before the congress. Each table evaluated that initial mission statement. Each element was discussed and evaluated. Changes and additional ideas were proposed. Our work was then collected and collated overnight. Next day, the deliberations of the previous day were subject to a second round of discussion and evaluation.

At first it seemed as if a few environmental extremists would succeed in sabotaging the process. There were rumours of a major walkout by environmentalists. There were some unfavourable reports in the press about major conflicts. There was even a hijacking of the microphone at both the congress and at a press conference. These actions by a few radical extremists seemed to achieve exactly the opposite effect to that which was intended. It increased the resolve of most of the environmental representatives to stay in the process and to see that it succeeded.

To an outsider the actions of those extremists appears utterly childish and extremely insulting. They seemed to be saying "if I can't have it all my way I will destroy the whole process". It is to the credit of the organisers that they made no attempt to limit the action of that disruptive element (tempting though that must have been). That the vast majority of environmental representatives stayed with the process did a great deal to enhance their standing. They earned a great deal of respect. Almost all the congress realised that the issues facing US forestry are very complex. Extremist positions by any one group, industry, environmentalists etc, will achieve nothing, certainly nothing approaching an acceptable and lasting solution. In spite of a media that tends to highlight differences between sides, it was a real pleasure to see so many determined to start working together achieve an understanding, as well as workable and sustainable solutions.

The process resulted in a vision and set of principles which most of us agreed with or could live with. Over those three and a half days a real team spirit developed and most left the conference feeling we were leaving friends even though most of us came with very different perceptions and backgrounds. To an outsider the outcome of the Congress may appear wordy and imprecise. There were major problems on definitions – for example, what exactly do we mean by the word "forest"?

It is my view that, to concentrate on the exact wording of the Congress Statements is to miss the main achievement of the Seventh American Forest Congress. That achievement was to demonstrate what can be achieved when those from diverse backgrounds, and holding opposing

views, work with, listen to and consider each other. If the process used by this conference is used to resolve the conflicts that still face American forestry then successful resolution is possible. If this happens, and most participants in the congress committed themselves to continue that process, then the Seventh American Congress will prove to have been a great success.

A quotation from a speaker at the closing of the conference was particularly apt: "If you do what you have always done you will get what you always got".

Some additional thoughts from Don Mead

Dr Wink Sutton has captured the feeling of the 7th American Forest Congress. I too felt it was a privilege to be invited to

attend so that the Congress could have some input from outsiders. There are a few other points that I would like to add to what Wink has said:

- The Congress was democracy in action. Anybody who wished to was allowed to attend and the organisers went out of their way to find sponsorship for those who needed financial assistance.
- This resulted in a reasonable cross-section of people present, although some minority groups were poorly represented.
- The group process that was undertaken, in order to allow all views to be heard, was the largest of its type ever to be attempted in the USA and probably the world. The organisation was superb, with about 100 support staff.

- The Congress was hard work with long hours. It was important to actively listen and be involved. It was, however, personally very rewarding.

- The level of agreement was outstanding. The vision statement for the US public and private forests was made up of a series of elements, each of which was voted on by all delegates. For each element we were asked if we agreed with the statement, could live with it, or if we disagreed. For one of the elements, only 3% disagreed.

Final Test

The final test of this Congress will be to see how the vision and the principles for managing the forests are actioned and how the dialogue that began at the Congress continues. This will be interesting to follow over the next decade.



RECENT EVENTS



School of Forestry News

Numbers

With all the Professional years now being taught at the University of Canterbury, the School is a very busy place indeed. There are 217 undergraduates (45 in the final year) and 64 postgraduate students (14 Diploma students, 36 Masters, and 12 Ph.D candidates). As well, the School is being used by many Engineering lecturers while the School of Engineering is undergoing building changes, swelling the numbers even further. While the numbers are impressive, there has been no great change from last year, both in the School and for the University of Canterbury as a whole.

Seminar Programme

The School's Seminar Programme seems even more active than in the past, with "aspects of international forestry" as the main theme. Already this year we have had speakers from Denmark, North Sumatra, Java, Bavaria, Virginia, Germany and Sabah, and they have attracted large audiences. As well, Don Wijewardana, from the Ministry of Forestry, presented his views on the current international debate on sustainable forest management. Alan Ogle of Groome Poyry will be the next speaker in the Dean's Lecture Series, and his topic will be "International Forestry Consulting and Opportunities for the Mar-

keting of New Zealand Expertise Off-shore".

SOFAC Meeting

The School recently hosted the members of the School of Forestry Advisory Committee, a group that has been set up to give the forestry sector's views to the School and to act, when appropriate, on the School's behalf. Members are Mike Cuddihy (DOC), Rod McGowan (FITEC), Helen Hughes (Ministry for the Environment), David New (Fletcher Forests), Kyran Newell (MOF), Bruce Manley (FRI), and Dennys Guild (private forestry consultant). Staff members on the Committee are Professor Sands and Dean Ron O'Reilly. SOFAC, which played a part in the recent review of the School and in the appointment of the Professor of the School, meets twice a year in Christchurch.

Staff Travel

Dr David Norton recently returned from a visit to Siberut, Indonesia and Sabah, Malaysia, where he familiarised himself with the ecology and conservation of the tropical forests. David was surprised by the strong floristic and structural similarities between upland forests such as those on Gunung Gede in Java and Mt Kanabalu in Sabah, and New Zealand forests. This

was especially so in groups such as the ferns, orchids and podocarps, but also in other groups (e.g. *Leptospermum*).

Liaison Committee Established

A joint School of Forestry - Lincoln University committee has been established to consider and communicate issues in forest teaching and research that are of mutual interest to the two universities. Setting up such a committee was one of the major recommendations of the recent School of Forestry review. Members of the committee from Lincoln are Professor Ian Cornforth, Soil Science, Dr Don Mead, Plant Science, and Dr Hugh Bigsby, Economic and Marketing. School of Forestry members include Professor Roger Sands, Dean Ron O'Reilly, and Dr Euan Mason.

School of Forestry on the Internet

News regarding the School of Forestry can be now found on the information highway, through the University of Canterbury site (<http://www.canterbury.ac.nz>) and clicking on University of Canterbury Department Home Pages. Jeanette Allen, Secretary at the School, reports that she is making progress with many of the news items which are still under development. Happy surfing!

Ron O'Reilly