

The professional forester and professionals in forestry - some thoughts

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Forestry is an interesting profession. Student foresters are exposed to a wide range of disciplines, with the attendant learning opportunities in, basic science, biology (with some emphasis on botany, harvest planning, ecology, forest economics, utilisation, marketing, processing, biometrics and much more. In almost all cases it could be argued that specialist degree programmes produce individuals with greater depth and more expertise than can be acquired through a forestry degree (or diploma). Unique to the forestry degree, apart from its specialist "disciplines" such as silviculture, is the "package" that contains a breadth not found in many other "followings". The broadly based generalist can, and often does, progress to develop specialist skills and expertise.

The intangible benefits to the emerging forester, hopefully, include the long view; an appreciation of sustainability; and the concept of "forest" as the entity - with its component parts making up the unique "whole", whether it be indigenous (and especially precious for that) or the equally important exotic (and differently precious). Forests produce (or should produce) sustainable benefits and foresters are stewards of forests.

Forestry in New Zealand has been through many changes in the last 10-15 years. You could say they have been tumultuous times. Government has sold almost all of its plantation forests. Public and private sector mergers and restructuring continue. Refocusing of endeavour continues within organisations. The forests themselves force change through the huge maturing volume that presents such an enormous opportunity for New Zealand, but requires equally grand thinking and substantial investment. Indigenous forests must now be managed sustainably in accordance with the provisions of the Forests Act.

So what are these changes doing to the profession? What does industry want of its staff and what is the "fit" for the forester?

The industry player still wants well-managed forests that are maintained in good health. She needs the value of the forest asset maintained or enhanced over time lest there is an adverse impact on the balance sheet, or not enough wood.

It wants to make a profit.

Clearly it needs foresters.

But increasingly companies owning commercial forests are looking for strong marketing and strong financial skills. They are looking for more commercial nous (some would say "smarts"). The focus has moved and is still moving, to acquisition of skills and understanding in these and in processing fields, to complement the high level of plantation management skill that has developed in New Zealand. There is an increasing need for processing skills, understanding and developments.

But there is another development within companies. Increasingly, the Company is addressing the question of "make" or "buy". It's a very similar question to that being addressed by Government. For forest management this means "do I have/keep it in house or do I buy it as a service?".

The trend is towards "buy".

The Government's need for foresters has also changed through the sale of Crown Forests and the recent decision to exit from the provision of forestry facilitation and support services. Neither of these decisions of themselves necessarily meant a reduced need for management or support services, rather

they are no longer provided by the public sector. The trend across the whole of Government is for less advisory activity and less selling of services which can be provided by the private sector.

Government is also increasingly addressing the "make or buy" question. These trends are evident in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry which is evolving towards a Policy and Regulatory agency. Good policy advice and good regulation requires sound knowledge and contact with the industry. The Ministry needs to "keep its finger on the pulse". For these reasons the Ministry will, in my view, continue to need a regional presence and a component of professional foresters on its staff. It needs good contacts. However the numbers are, and will be, fewer because we no longer provide advisory services to industry and the focus is on providing well-informed advice to Ministers and on sound regulation.

So where to for the forester?

If true efficiency improvement means that fewer foresters will be required, then so be it.

If the need for a diverse range of skill and expertise by organisations results in a lower proportion of foresters in the total pool of professionals in the industry than previously, then so be it.

Changes in how things are done or how organisations obtain expertise may result in fewer professional foresters being employed in those organisations, but these changes of themselves don't mean that fewer foresters are required overall. What it does mean is that there will be more foresters outside corporate and government organisations than inside. Increasingly professional foresters will be sellers of services to, rather than employees of, the corporate forest owner.

Consulting foresters also provide services to Government agencies and, increasingly, to owners of indigenous forest who want to develop and obtain approval for sustainable management plans.

If we look around us we see they are grouped mostly in small groups or associations or operate as sole practitioners. In future we will see more of them in contracting and contract management.

Where will professional cohesion and counsel be obtained in this more fragmented profession?

Now more than ever we need a strong professional association.

The Institute of Forestry has a future - to lead the profession.

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