

# High Tech and Sexy

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In early December I attended an International University Forest Education Leaders workshop at the University of British Columbia, sponsored by UBC and the FAO. An underlying theme of this workshop was a need to deal with what has become for forestry educators a serious recruitment problem. North American and Australasian universities, including venerable institutions in the Pacific Northwest, are reporting persistent, declining enrolments in forestry programmes.

Not surprisingly, educators are becoming concerned over the root causes of the decline. While the education system has an interest in student numbers because that is what pays the bills, the wider forestry sector should also be interested in what is happening because that is what influences the talent pool that it draws from. On a broad scale, the forest industry and the forestry profession should be concerned about whether the decline in forestry enrolments is symptomatic of a wider negative or "non" perception of the forestry sector.

My perception is that the decline in enrolments is not linked to any perception by school-leavers about employment prospects (which appear to be healthy), but rather that forestry has gone "off the radar screen" and is not considered at all. One can argue whether careers advisors at high schools have influenced this state of affairs, but to some extent other "land-based" professions are also facing forestry's dilemma. Between 1997 and 2000, total enrolments in tertiary institutions rose by 7.3% while enrolments in the Agriculture, Horticulture, Forestry and Fishing category declined by 4.7%. The suggestion has been made that there is a general movement away from these "traditional" types of sectors into areas such as tourism and computing which are deemed to be either or both of more "sexy" or "high-tech".

While I am not in any position to judge the "sexy" part of forestry, if the software articles in this issue of the Journal are any indication, the sector is oozing "high-tech". Combined with its span from forest to wood products in international markets, the New Zealand forest sector has all the elements of an enticing career. Couple this with expanding production and there are all the elements of a sector that should be drawing people.

When I first arrived in New Zealand in 1993, it was at the height of the log price spike and forestry was in the news all the time. Moreover, the news was all positive and forestry had a real "buzz" to it. Not

surprisingly, students were attracted to a forestry career and enrolments surged. The period since then has seen a significant change in the profile of forestry. In New Zealand, forestry quickly disappeared from the news, hence the "non-perception" and, when it made its infrequent appearances, was generally in a negative context of restructuring or environmental conflicts, hence the "negative perception".

In some parts of the world forestry educators have responded to the perceived negative image of traditional forestry by broadening or changing names and degree offerings to include other related areas such as recreation or general resource management in order to keep up student numbers. This approach is not inherently a watering down of "classical forestry", as the profession has in my experience always had a wide, multidisciplinary scope with a common basis around management and use of trees and forests. However, even this has in many cases been insufficient to maintain student numbers.

There have been a number of initiatives to positively raise the profile of forestry in primary and secondary schools and to publicise career opportunities (e.g. [www.careers.co.nz](http://www.careers.co.nz)). The problem with many of these forums is that forestry is competing with everyone else simultaneously at the time when a person is looking. What is more effective is having people hear about forestry in a wide variety of places and continuously. Undoubtedly one of the reasons that computing is so popular is that it is omnipresent. It features regularly in the news, and has its own sections in the popular press.

This is where there is a role for members of the NZIF, who as forestry professionals and Institute members, need to be active in promoting forestry and the profession nationally and in local communities. There have been notable examples of local sections organising public days and people who are active in the press, however these tend to be one-off events or revolve around particular issues.

What we really need is to do is get out a sustained message that forestry is positive, and that a forestry career offers the same scope as other sectors for high tech and sexy opportunities.

On a closing note, I have now been editor of the NZIF's "Journal" for five and a half years and it is time to let someone else steer the "printed" face of the NZIF. It has been an interesting time for me and introduced me to wide range of people associated with the New Zealand and internationally.

## Calendar 2002

### 12-16 March 2002

New Zealand Forest Industries International Conference and Expo, Rotorua.  
Contact: [bal@wave.co.nz](mailto:bal@wave.co.nz)

### 2-6 July 2002

Woodfor Africa 2002, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Contact: [woodforafrica@futurenet.co.za](mailto:woodforafrica@futurenet.co.za)

### 10-14 September 2002

Management of Fast Growing Plantations IZMIT Organised by Poplar and Fast-growing Trees Research Institute, Ministry of Forestry, Turkey.  
[www.iufro.boku.ac.at](http://www.iufro.boku.ac.at)