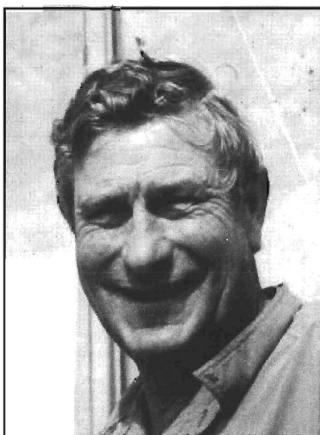


Land manager extraordinaire

Robert Mackintosh (Bob) Priest 1940 – 2004

With the passing of Bob Priest at his Hamilton home on Wednesday 21 January 2004, New Zealand lost one of its most experienced and knowledgeable land managers and environmentalists. Born in Ranfurly, Central Otago, Bob grew up in Wanganui where his father worked as a doctor and specialist in lung diseases.



Bob began his working career in 1960 with the New Zealand Forest Service, mainly in Auckland, Southland and Canterbury. I first met Bob in 1963 when, during university summer holidays, he began working for the Forest and Range Experiment Station in Rangiora where he was involved with high country vegetation and erosion surveys in Canterbury and Westland and the establishment of hydrological experiments. The one thing I soon learnt about Bob was that his quirky sense of humour and “laid back” outward character belied an inner determination and driving interest in the management of land and water.

After completing a BSc in Geology at Otago and Auckland Universities, Bob joined the Waikato Valley Authority in 1968 where he became involved with the planning of the early soil conservation work on the pumice plateau. This marked the beginning of a distinguished career with the Waikato Regional Council (Environment Waikato) which lasted until March 2003 when he was appointed as an Environment Commissioner to the Environment Court. This appointment duly recognised Bob's abilities and knowledge and the tremendous service he had provided to soil and water conservation, local government and environmental science.

Over 35 years of employment with Environment Waikato Bob rose from junior soil conservator to Deputy CEO. During this time he was a member of a number of national and international working parties and committees and undertook several overseas consultancies.

He gained a formidable knowledge of the RMA, Local Government Act and other relevant legislation and developed strong views about how they should be implemented. It was this knowledge which was largely responsible for Bob's reputation as an “elder statesman” within local government. Perhaps his greatest attribute

was his ability to relate to and communicate with land managers, politicians and other colleagues in a manner which was unambiguous and fully comprehensible.

Bob was not one for placing a “spin” on issues or problems and he was critical of those who did. I was recently told by a senior Environment Waikato staff member that on many occasions Bob was able to effectively resolve seemingly intractable problems and misunderstandings between politicians and Environment

Waikato by applying his superior communication skills and common sense. He also expressed the view that Bob's shift to join the Environment Court had left a gaping relationship / communication hole which to date Environment Waikato has not been able to fill.

Throughout his career Bob maintained a strong interest in forestry. He was one of the old school who believed in integrated forest land management and was not particularly comfortable with the strong separation of production and conservation which has pervaded New Zealand's forest policies and management since the 1980s.

Bob was very enthusiastic about his new Environment Court Commissioner job. He told me just before he died that one of his greatest regrets was that he was not going to progress beyond the “learning stage” of his new job. However, during the short time he was a commissioner he seemed to accomplish a good deal and was involved with a diverse range of issues including foreshore access ways in Northland, supermarket extensions in Christchurch and water irrigation developments in mid Canterbury.

My strongest memories of Bob Priest will be his wry sense of humour, his amazing knowledge of people, his ability to express himself, his strong sense of “fairness”, his love of rugby and cricket and his ability to relate to people in an easy manner.

Bob leaves behind his wife Denise and his two children, Helen and Andrew, both of whom have established successful professional careers in the Power and Forest industries respectively.

Colin O'Loughlin