

Forestry's darkest hour

Sir,

Amongst the reflective comment in the media celebrating the 20th anniversary of the advent of 'Rogernomics' there has been rather little reflection on the fortunes of both the forestry and railways sectors. The unholy alliance of Treasury and the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society that led to the premature demise of the former New Zealand Forest Service deserves quiet reflection too.

The idea of abandoning a forest service with oversight for all the forestry estate throughout the country had attained significant enviable international status. Both the forestry and railways sectors suffered massive job losses and subsequent profitability in the private sector has proven to be very disappointing indeed.

Back in those days (1980s) I was a member of the subsequently axed New Zealand Forestry Council that had been so ably led by Callum Kirkpatrick and Barry Downey for about 15 years. The Council was an outcome of the earlier National Development Conferences and in my experience spent more than half its time giving detailed attention to our indigenous forestry estate as part of an evolving national strategy for the sector.

Like Dr Lindsay Poole and others, I deeply regretted the abandonment of the New Zealand Forest Service and the multiple values culture it was nurturing for the benefit of all people. In the race for the quick fire sale dollar thousands of jobs were lost in both the forestry and railways sectors. Many of these were formerly held by Maori and the social consequences of this radical and sudden State intervention are still painfully evident today.

The polarisation of our national forestry estate into introduced commercial plantation production managed by the private sector on the one hand and the retirement of the indigenous forestry assets for management by the Department of Conservation has in my view proven to be on balance most unhelpful to quality stewardship. It is true that extensive plantation forestry does not provide the soft adornment to our wonderful landscapes as do the grassland pastoral enterprises. But the effect of the earlier split in management has meant that in the public perception all indigenous treescapes are good while the seemingly endless pine plantations and wilding escapes are a blight on our landscape inheritance.

Furthermore the more recent and prominent management policies of the private sector in such major investments as the dominant central North

Island Kaingaroa Forest are seen to embrace a huge fibre factory and export log revenue earner with the profits (and jobs) going to the overseas processors. All too often we seem to have lost a feel for the forest culture. We have far too few professional foresters now dedicated to the care of our indigenous estate. The hands off policy instituted in Westland has denied the opportunity to add real value in handcraft processing – a goal that was well within sight.

Meantime I am struggling to encourage the Dunedin City Forests company under the excellent management of Phil Taylor to retain a relatively small compartment of 80-year old Douglas fir on the Flagstaff Creek site close to the widely known Taieri Plains lookout on Three Mile Hill. The treasury managers are looking for short term dollars. This 'heritage' pioneer planting has a natural outdoor cathedral like atmosphere with the tall firs standing like monumental pillars and which together with a pleasant understorey of indigenous plants and shrubs and a nearby regenerating New Zealand native beech colony, creating a marvelous setting for our songbirds and visitors.

This might be seen as a useful model that might be looked upon as a bridge in the public eye between the ancient heritage and the more recent man-made resource as a more rapidly growing source of timber for utilisation. Modern selective logging practices can enable these unique forest landscapes to serve multi-use purposes - including recreation and public amenity.

We have to lift the public respect for our introduced trees today – for their beauty and amenity as well as for their valuable revenue earning potential. And we need to place more emphasis on 'added value' craftsmanship to provide many more jobs that challenge our creative talents and potential.

I applaud Piers Maclaren for his frank and up to date assessment - "forestry's darkest hour" together with similar comments by Denis Hocking in the current issue of *NZ Forest Industries*. We need to come together and fashion a new vision for forestry and its place in our enviable environments.

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