

The Leading Edge

The originating history of MDF in New Zealand

by Piers Maclaren

(ISBN 0 473 10183 1) NZIF 2005

Reviewed by Bill Studholme

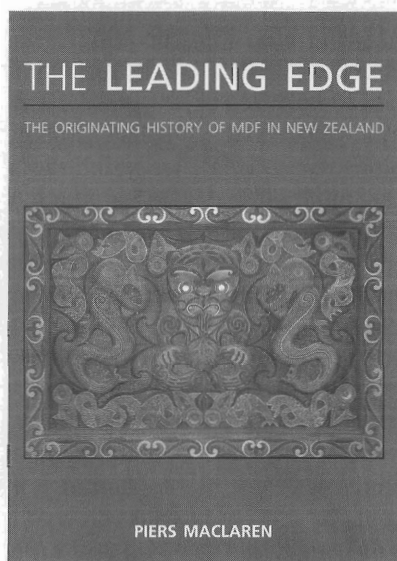
In his foreword Piers Maclaren acknowledges that in 2003 Peter Allan, John Groome, and Rob van Rossen felt that someone needed to interview the pioneers of MDF in New Zealand and document the evolution of CTP's Sefton plant. That they commissioned Piers Maclaren to the task must attract the grateful thanks of all in the forest industry and, indeed, the wider business community.

Piers has recorded in meticulous detail the history and development of this major plant. The reader is left in no doubt that a scientist of the calibre of Piers MacLaren has the ability to both tease out and yet make a fascinating read of the twists, turns, and corporate intrigues that came with the development of MDF in New Zealand. As Piers has put it, MDF evolved from "Major Robert Wilson's original idea" and "Owen Haylock's knowledge of chemistry, the forest industry and the world of commerce". These factors combined with Haylock's "persistence, and the meticulous application of scientific method, were the reasons that he solved problems that eluded others. Perspiration, not inspiration." Add to this the rich pallet of other players and technical explanation means that Piers has crafted a very readable account of one of the forestry sector's greatest triumphs of the last forty years.

The Leading Edge guides the reader through the building methods of the last century up to today and answers, in a very readable form, the processes that take MDF from the raw log to finished fibreboard. Carefully recorded is the need for a substitute to take over the dwindling clearwood volumes from indigenous forests and the spectacularly successful development of MDF which rapidly replaced house components such as flooring, mouldings, and furniture although, to date, MDF has been generally unsuccessful in developing an acceptable exterior cladding.

The availability of the wood resource and the tender process that secured it for CTP is probably the least well documented part of the book, a reflection I assume of the unavailability of records following the demise of the Forest Service. However, the fascinating account of the financing of the project more than compensates for this as does the description and discussion of the consent process, such as it was in the 1970s, and the actual building of the plant.

People are pivotal to any enterprise. Space did not permit Piers to provide detailed descriptions of more than the key players but this he has done in a clear and precise way. He has, however, listed all the original employees.



That combined with detailed descriptions of the disappointments and successes of development of both the production and marketing give the reader a good feel for the characters and their functioning during CTP's formative years. The manoeuvring by the forestry sector's corporates are also laid bare and provide a fascinating insight into the tactics displayed in the establishment and subsequent functioning of this major plant.

To those who were on the fringes of the plant's development, Piers' research fills in a number of the gaps in this revolutionary period of New Zealand's forestry history. CTP's MDF is the development in added value that all who grow trees strive for as they attempt to move from the commodity trap which stifles the economics of plantation

forestry. Piers describes the start of the enterprise in July 1975, at a time when oil prices had more than doubled in the preceding two years and at a time when inflation was running at 17.7%, as "audacious, almost cheeky" and "a great leap in faith". To separate wood into its component fibres and then recombine them into an innovative new board by a process that was still in its tentative infancy, and then put that board onto a market which was wary of reconstituted wood products better suited, in the market's view, to the weetbix packet than construction projects, was certainly a great leap in faith.

The positioning of the technology and the various players as they developed and marketed "customwood", described as the best board in the world, was fraught with what at times must have seemed insurmountable obstacles and yet there must also have been hugely gratifying successes. Besides this historical record, Piers injects a measure of political philosophy of the 1980s contrasted with today's environmentally tinged politics.

He does not confine his work to the purely forestry side of the business but also comments freely and in depth on the more pure business concepts. A successful wood processing business needs, he postulates, six fundamentals: a good idea, access to suitable raw material, a potential market, the right mix of qualified people, planning permission, and funding to make it all happen. Each of these is in turn recorded, examined, and commented on.

The book is well written and very readable. It has none of the monotony that is generally associated with corporate records because, while it is that, it is also a commentary on recent and contemporary commercial forestry history. The

Leading Edge dissects and traces the complex moves that have given impetus and focus to the birth of the worldwide MDF phenomenon and should be obligatory reading for all in the NZ forest industry. It combines the scientist's precise

analysis of the historical facts with thoughtful comment on social developments. The book faithfully records events of the day, while at the same time putting them in a context that is easily readable.

Forestry in a Global Context

By Roger Sands

(ISBN 0 85199 089 4). CABI Publishing, UK.

Reviewed by Don Wijewardana

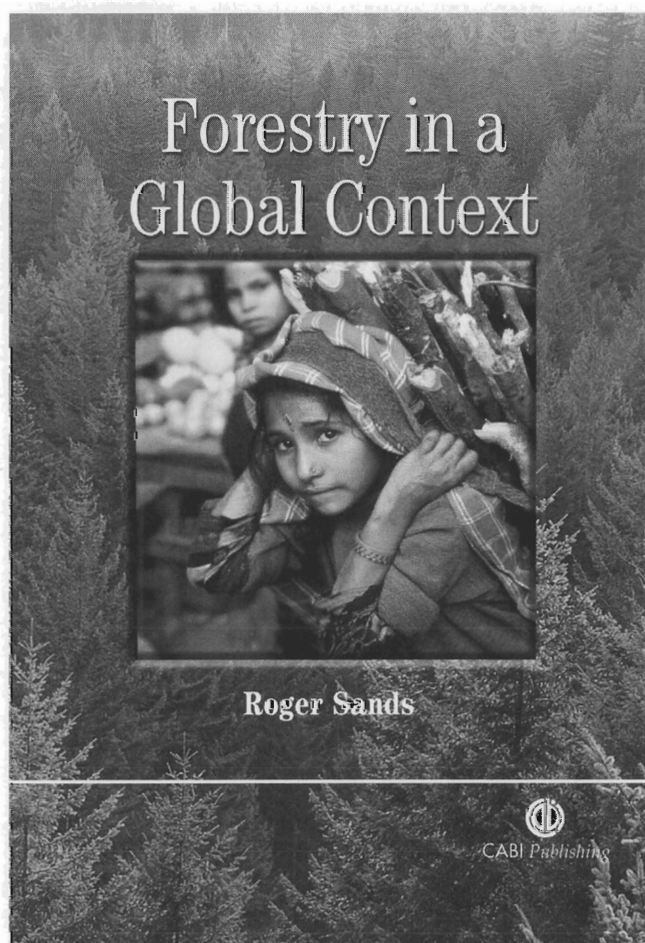
Since the Earth Summit of 1992 there has been mounting pressure on the global community to deal with the massive scale of global deforestation and equally alarming, but less apparent, forest degradation. The concern stems for other reasons too. There is now a greater recognition of the non-timber values of forests, which in some circumstances could be even more important, and from the need to use these resources in such a way as not to deny the same facility for future generations.

There has been much written on these issues lately. But to my knowledge there is none that captures so comprehensively the current state of play as in Roger Sands' *Forestry in a Global Context*. In less than 250 pages of text, Sands covers the history of human interaction with forestry from the beginning around 350 million years ago to the present day. But the important thing is it is not just a historical account. He looks critically at each phase of development.

The book has a wealth of information and very useful references on each subject covered. While the entire work is important the chapters that I found most interesting were those on the environmental value of forests, deforestation and forest degradation in the tropics, sustainable forest management and forest plantations. Views on these are so polarised that very often what one reads are the entrenched views of one side or the other. It is for this reason that reaching global solutions has been difficult. The value of Sands' work is that he not only gives the arguments of the two sides but also critically evaluates them to suggest common ground.

On sustainable forest management for instance, he correctly points out that defining it as "setting aside the maximum area of protected forest that can be economically and socially sustained" gives it a negative spin as choosing the least of evils. Instead he suggests considering it in a positive light where products of the forest are appreciated as renewable resources constructed by solar energy and which are environmentally superior to their competitors.

In spite of the rapid growth of the global plantation forest area over the past ten years, criticism, especially of single species plantations, from some groups persists. Sands judiciously reflects the arguments for the two sides in the chapter on plantation forests. It is a must-read to gain a balanced view.



One area where there could be improvement is in the general index. I found some important issues such as illegal logging or criteria and indicators not captured in it. With so many new organisations coming into being recently, a glossary of acronyms could also have been useful.

Forestry is not a subject that can be made easily attractive to readers. But I found *Forestry in a Global Context* so very readable. That highlights Sands' ability as a writer who can explain involved issues in an easy-to-understand simple language not only for the student and the forestry professional but also for the general reader. This book is strongly recommended for anyone who wants to understand current global forestry issues.