

Practical logging researcher and manager - always with a grin

John Gaskin 1952-2006

John Edward Gaskin was born in 1952 in Hawkes Bay. He grew up in Taranaki and followed the example of his father, an ardent outdoorsman, in enjoying open space. John latched early onto mountain climbing at which he became accomplished.

Educated at New Plymouth Boys High he achieved a useful grounding in communication and analytical skills. Some of the intellectual prowess of his mother, Ida Gaskin, a convincing winner of the New Zealand television program *Mastermind*, took until later to shine through.

John progressed to Rotorua where he acquired his NZ Certificate in Forestry. This was then followed by a stint as a Forest Ranger in Kaingaroa forest. His determination to be personally proficient in harvesting, rather than just to supervise operations, saw him leave the Forest Service to work for a logging contractor.

Most importantly, it was at this stage that he met and married Robyn, a kindred spirit from Taranaki. They were to remain a formidable team throughout John's life. Both were engaged in forestry, with Robyn becoming a leading scientist at FRI.

When John came into the Logging Industry Research Association (LIRA) it was at the right time and in circumstances that allowed John and the organisation to pioneer new ground together. He was initially recruited because LIRA needed credibility in the field, and this was something John assuredly provided. He was already an experienced tree feller and machine operator. Just as importantly he had been a crew foreman, and so had a grasp of the human dynamics within a logging operation.

From his early days at LIRA John was happy to cultivate a bushman's larrikin image but this was soon superseded by a growing assurance, borne of his ongoing accomplishments. To his harvesting system development initiatives in New Zealand he added experience gleaned offshore. In 1985 he spent a year with the research organisation Skogsarbeten, in Sweden. There the research directions had assumed a strong focus on ergonomics and John was to bring this back to LIRA.

John stepped into the Director's role at LIRA as it morphed into LIRO, an institution, with a considerably more bureaucratic process. It presented the significant challenge of melding together two disparate organisations – LIRA, and the Harvest Planning Group of the Forest Research Institute. John saw the process through with a loyalty to LIRA's original principles and objectives. Then, with that task seemingly completed, and after 17 years at the organisation, it became time to move on.

Over his time at LIRA/LIRO John had been the author or co-author of more than 60 LIRO reports. Revisiting their content, they are remarkable for their breadth of subject matter. They cover harvesting systems of every description, the business of harvesting, and log value recovery among other subjects. However his greatest contributions related



to the logging workforce, and improving its safety, skills and productivity. His work was a significant part of LIRA's determined focus of propagating its findings by any and all means possible. The publications remain the most tangible evidence of the larger communication process.

After LIRA/LIRO, John's attention once again came to be directed internationally. This time the destination was Sumatra, Indonesia, and his accomplishments there were remarkable, if largely unobserved by New Zealand contemporaries. The client required that a harvesting operation be set up in time to supply a pulpmill that was nearing completion. Plantations of *Acacia mangium* were already established, but the harvesting and wood delivery systems were yet to be fully planned and instituted.

It was good fortune that some of John's earliest work at LIRA was now to come back into its own. He encouraged the introduction of forwarders for the extraction phase, but also recognised that the performance of such equipment in small piece sizes was critically dependent on the presentation of the felled stems. John was determined to see the necessary practices implemented, with no half measures. When a local contractor protested that what John was asking was too much John rolled his eyes, sharpened his chainsaw, donned his safety gear, and spent a day in the bush. The exercise proved John's point and the contractor became a firm ally. When the PT Tanjung Enim Lestari Pulp & Paper mill started it had a yard full of wood, and the supply system in place to provide it with 2.2 million tonnes of logs per year.

Following the Indonesian work, John looked for a more sustained presence in New Zealand. A “made-for-Gaskin” opportunity presented itself, assisting Ferrier Hodgson in their receivership management of the Central North Island Forest Partnership, as they positioned that resource for sale. John’s boss at that stage was Colin McKenzie, a former president of the NZIF, who observed that, “John Gaskin for me was the consultant’s consultant; experienced, confident in his professional knowledge, ethical and personable. He had a welcome ability to concisely summarise an issue in a few well selected words.”

One substantial assignment with Ferrier Hodgson was followed by another. John and Peter Clark assumed a joint management role of Huaguang Forests Ltd (In Receivership). Peter comments, “My lasting impression will be that rare mix of down-to-earth practical experience, the ability to make constructive suggestions ... and to translate the complexities created by an adverse operating environment into practical suggestions for financiers to act upon.”

In the last year John had been encouraged to take a senior harvesting management role with Carter Holt Harvey, located at Tokoroa. The scale of CHH’s operations, and the troubled state of forest profitability in New Zealand meant that far from being a plum position, the call-up represented an exceptional challenge. John was recognised as the critical man for a critical position. Sadly, with a new year beckoning, and an array of new initiatives sketched out in a Friday afternoon whiteboard exercise, John was felled by a heart

attack on the afternoon of Sunday 15 January. True to the philosophy of Kiwi self-reliance (if not to his cardiologist’s advice) he was crutching his sheep flock at the time.

John’s funeral drew an immense attendance and many recollections. These related to not only his prominent role in the forest industry but his equally estimable accomplishments with New Zealand Gun Dog Trials Association. He became internationally recognised for his contribution to the breeding of top quality working Irish Setters.

More than one eulogy at John’s funeral made reference to the common element to John’s demeanour, the ‘Gaskin Grin’. If he was not already wearing it, it never seemed far away, as the photographic archives at LIRA attested. The grin could be variously disarming, engaging, and wry. It could also seem irreverent and, reassuringly, in some of the bureaucratically overburdened circumstances that warranted it, the irreverence was genuine.

Adding to the sense of loss was the observation that John had accomplished so much in his 53 years, and yet there is so much yet to be done in the New Zealand forest industry to which colleagues had expected to look to him for leadership. His is the example and vision that we must now follow.

John was a member of the NZIF and a Registered Forest Consultant. He is survived by Robyn, to whom we extend our profound sympathies.

Jim Spiers/Bill Liley

2006 NZIF AGM and Conference

Venue: Te Papa in Wellington

Dates: 20 to 23 April 2006

20 April: NZIF AGM

21-22 April: NZIF Conference

23 April: Field Trip

For queries, suggestions, etc on the conference, contact Howard Moore howard.moore@paradise.net.nz or www.eventmergers.co.nz