

Land use change in New Zealand

When I was a child in England, land use was immutable. In my eyes nothing changed. And yet it did – the chalk downs had changed under the pressure of war from extensive sheep pasture to cropping. By the time I was a teenager the only sheep farmer in the district was an expatriate New Zealander whose chief skill lay in his ability to train his flock to open other people's gates. The environmental consequences, drastic changes to flora and fauna and fertiliser polluted groundwater, took much longer to be recognised.

By contrast in New Zealand changing land use is a constant. The land itself changes, a product of continuing plate collision, at any time likely to disrupt the best laid plans.

From small and recent beginnings people changed the land. The first settler wave, few in the beginning and responsible for their own growth, brought with them fire and rats, and ate up much of the larger fauna. The second wave changed the first by virtue of having an inexhaustible source of immigrants, crops and tools suited to temperate climate agriculture, and a raging thirst for new introductions.

When we foresters talk land-use change we do it in a pastoral culture. One of my earliest recollections of New Zealand was, in course of visits here and there, of being shown by spinster aunts and ancient widows childhood photos of some sylvan glen, and told nostalgic tales of family picnics there. When I asked to see the reply was always the same – 'gone, all lovely grass now', followed on one occasion by a male opinion that it was a good thing too, as we had discovered in New Zealand that trees cause disease – to sheep I hoped.

On both sides of the fence we see land use change as a threat, on the pastoral side as a reversion to wilderness, on the foresters' side value casually wasted in the cause of psycho-ceramic economics where instant production and real estate values are inextricably mixed.

Yet change continues as it always has, but it is the speed of the change where forestry misses out – just a fleeting moment to change from sheep to dairy, from trees to dairy, assets destroyed and foreign debt accumulated, and now, in little more than a decade, hints that perhaps it wasn't all such a good thing after all. So perhaps the climate change interregnum imposed on plantation forest clearance was a good thing. It gave time for the hype to die and for large forest owners to consider again their case for an undignified gold rush out of trees.

The pastoral mindset still needs to be remembered when we talk about trees, but all is not gloom. I recently heard Don Nicholson, current President of Federated farmers, arguing on the radio in support of trees as a land use with their place in erosion-prone country, and our newsletter recently reported support for our case from the current

Minister of Forests, David Carter, when he addressed a meeting of the Wellington branch of the NZ Institute of Forestry on 9 March.

The climate change debate, whatever one's view, has engendered a great swelling of creative ideas on energy generation, new materials and new philosophies of life. Forests and wood play a big part in them all, if only because of increasing recognition that trees are so far the most benign catchers of solar energy yet devised, as well as for their useful roll in gobbling up carbon.

Here also we see an unplanned benefit of that regrettable sale of State forests. Whilst we have lost ownership we have at least achieved variety in management, with companies and managers already testing the water in their search for new roles for wood. It is unlikely that we would have got that from a single State corporation.

But if we see, some of us, a golden age for forests and forestry ahead of us, and our own pioneers no doubt dream of a return to the days when life was simple, of Kaingaroa heaven, endless radiata pine, 4x2s, and wood chips, let us beware of that simplicity because it won't stand up to public view. People look for more imagination in forest design and management. Perhaps it is time for production forest management plans to be publicly notifiable documents.

We can decry that as unfair, an application of different standards to those applied to other land uses. Maybe it is, but already it becomes dated. In Southland (where I live) the regional council is actively moving into differential charging to reclaim externalised costs, particularly from dairy farming where boom-time enthusiasm has led the industry into places where it had better not be.

One thing we have surely learned in New Zealand is that forest is better not casually destroyed. The evidence of that lies all around us in once cleared hillsides reverting back to woody vegetation. So far we have only applied that lesson to natural forest, but given the time spans involved surely the same applies to plantation forests. They are not to be destroyed by whim. Time forbids it. Within that constraint, land use change should cause foresters few fears.

The questions lie in how it is done. The 2008 conference made a start but there is still a long way to go. The future lies in our hands.

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