

Forestry is the new green

Forestry research seems to have lost its sparkle. Having conscientiously attended Coop workshops since the early Pleistocene, the March meeting of the Future Forests Research radiata pine theme was a disappointment. Same old stuff: solving yesterday's problems. Where was the infectious excitement of previous years?

Greater volume growth! Better wood quality! Yawn. Radiata pine already grows better than we have a right to expect from any species in a temperate country. And as for wood quality, do we actually need greater stiffness, smaller branches and less resinous features? I've got news for those who say we do: if we wanted timber with all the properties of Douglas-fir, we wouldn't start with radiata pine! How come Western Red Cedar - despite its very low density - is far more valuable than pine and better suited for niche uses such as window sashes? How come the most valuable timber is reportedly balsa wood - one of the lightest of all? And if we require something as hard as steel, there is always steel. The moral: there are horses for courses, and radiata already performs well in its traditional roles. By all means supplement radiata pine with other species, but future developments for pine - and for all forestry, for that matter - lie in a totally different direction.

Forestry may once have been driven only by timber revenues, but no longer. Modern managers can have any colour they want, so long as it is green. For the gnarled and knotty old foresters who still try to fight last century's strange wars between foresters and environmentalists, please get your head into the new era. Environmentalism is not the old enemy, it is the new friend. And it should always have been that way. In a mediaeval village, if you wanted to find an environmentalist, a good start would have been to ask for the local forester.

So how have the Radiata Theme handled environmental issues? Why, they have duck-shoved everything remotely "environmental" onto the new Environment Theme. And what has Kit Richards and his tiny band of merry men (no doubt dressed in Lincoln green) done with all this stuff? With all due respect to the hard-working and dedicated Kit, not a lot of arrows have struck bull's eyes so far.

In the course of distributing the research cargo between four boats (Radiata, Diversified Species, Harvesting and Environment), most seems to have spiralled down into Davy Jones' locker. And, talking of lockers, the irony is that the keys are located in the old Radiata programme. Let me explain.

Green is profitable: carbon has the potential to put forestry back in the black. The easiest way to model carbon is to use the radiata and Douglas-fir carbon Calculators, as developed by the old Coops under the late Leith Knowles. And water use? One way to calculate water interception, and therefore streamflow reductions, is to look at crown

closure - also in those Calculators. This will also give a good indication of light penetration to the understorey, hence biodiversity. And a good way to assess soil erosion is to quantify root biomass - yes those same Calculators again. And of course there is the whole issue of energy security: wood pellets, liquid fuels, and so on. You can easily estimate the biofuel components on a site (whether branches, unmerchantable logs or stumps) using those very tools. But of course you can't operate the Calculators effectively unless you fully understand the 300 Index and the 500 Index, which in the case of Kit's merry band in Sherwood Forest is most unlikely.

It's all very well to divide a difficult problem into components in order to analyse and operate it more effectively, but with a living, breathing biological system, the process of dissection might well end in death. Research is far, far more about people and their motivation than it is about separation into "themes", funding, targets and "milestones". Research managers worldwide have always been slow to learn this message: one must choose the most highly motivated and outstanding individuals and provide them with every assistance wherever which way they choose to wander. The funding should follow the best scientists and not vice-versa.

The topic of this issue is "Pruning a recession". The forestry sector is in the depths of despair. Are things really that bad? Well, the best indicator of the Sector's health is the rate of afforestation. In the 2008 NEFD report, it is noted that new-land planting rates are lower than they have been since 1945, with a net loss in forest area of 17,100 ha; (and back in 1945 we had more pressing things on our mind than forestry). Honey-tongued buzzings from the Beehive can't take the sting out of these statistics.

The Journal was advised that a survey of attitudes about "Forestry in a recession" would not be well supported by major players. For commercial reasons, they would not want to portray their industry as being in dire straits. So, we rephrased the questions to focus specifically on pruning. Being a "discretionary" part of forest expenditure, attitudes to pruning may tell us a lot about the cashflow situation and outlook of forest managers but without the obvious political and commercial implications. We hope you value the results we have obtained.

Piers Maclaren



The proposed theme for the November issue is Climate Change. This should be highly topical, given that the much-heralded Copenhagen meeting is scheduled for December. We would welcome your contributions. The deadline is 9 October.