

## Hard times

**I**t's been hard times for forestry. We missed out on the good times because of the high dollar and high freight rates, we had our expectations raised by Kyoto - for once we were the good guys but we are still waiting - but are these reasons or are they excuses ?

Pioneering economies such as ours love quantity rather than quality and the grower is much more admired than the seller, who is indeed more usually seen as a parasite on the grower's back. We produce ad nauseam, throwing the product over our shoulder in the hope that some one will catch it and flick it on. We set up cooperatives, but more to circle the wagons than to capture the market. It is only with great reluctance that we accept that the people out there might want something different from what we are offering, and we weep over the injustice of it all.

In this forestry is little different from agriculture, except that we lag further behind and we weep rather less. We rejoice when the export log price rises whilst all the while complaining about freight rates and disregarding the fact that two thirds of the log's weight (if radiata) is water which the buyer doesn't need or pay for but gets regardless.

So, what do we do? The big advance in my time (since 1962) came at the beginning with the acceptance that for radiata pine, at least, fast growth + pruning + thinning = high quality butt logs + a resource of cellulose above for other as yet undecided uses. We had broken through the barrier of conventional thinking that high quality wood could only come from old slow grown trees, a mantra inherited from the plunder of natural forest.

At about the same time the log export market arrived, finding a profitable use for all that surplus plantation wood we couldn't otherwise sell without a pulp mill in every province. Putting the two together we had a final solution for forestry - log export for now and the raw material for a new range of industries and uses for the next generation. We had the key to swap quantity for quality.

It took a while for the new deal to be accepted and bedded in, and as always, being human, we sometimes carried things too far, from pruning everything in sight to nothing at all. We didn't appreciate site restrictions on growth itself, and we still don't fully appreciate the difference between site induced log qualities, for instance that some localities grow wood whose chief virtue lies in its appearance, probably requiring pruning, whilst others do better in strength, with branch size control a higher priority.

Pruning and thinning, not only of radiata, are now the standards against which silvicultural needs are measured. And that, in the forest, is all that has happened since. The 'other uses' for the unpruned part of the tree haven't eventuated, despite endless research. Our industry just hasn't heeded the message.

For a while I have heard that corporate foresters are moving away from pruning. So far I haven't heard any reason for that beyond immediate economy, just a whisper in the wind, but as I heard it first when times were good there must be something more to it. Recently one (from farther north than Southland I hasten to add) told me that there was no point in pruning when export logs sold for the same price, pruned or unpruned. Well, maybe that is so, but the question remains - should we be exporting logs at all, let alone purposefully growing them for the purpose? Is that really all that we can do?

There must be a better reason than that. In the meantime, foresters in Nelson (the apparent source of the whisper) must make it clear why they intend not to prune and what they are doing in its place to raise the quality of their product. Similarly others elsewhere.

What we have to avoid is the feeling that change on its own is progress, particularly change backwards. Remember 'Millennium Forestry', seen as the solution to corporate hardening of the arteries? It disappeared, along with the company, a memorial on the grave of the single solution. Diversity is not only of value in the natural world but in our market place too. We know that. Many people have said it, so why do we fight so hard against it?

Just down the road from here the towers rise of another industry dedicated to commodity. The product is milk powder, just now selling on the world market at less than the cost of production, the equivalent of our log trade. The suppliers have a Clayton's alternative. Their co-op gives a premium for organic milk, but not in Southland - we drew the powder straw and there is nothing left over for alternatives. Oh Ozymandias, where art thou?

So what is our solution? How do we get past the preference for pulling wood and 16 tonne digging? The obvious one is a tax on log export sales, to be returned as an encouragement to companies doing something more imaginative with their forests. Biofuels, Lockwood-style construction, growing fungus, my pitifully short list - you add to it. A subsidy? Certainly not, just an encouragement to use the brain. A grower's co-op? Certainly not - on this scale that's the most brain dead option of all.

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