

World Forestry Congress - a NZ Perspective

The theme of this issue is the thirteenth World Forestry Congress, held on 18-23 October 2009 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The size and importance of this event can be gauged from the fact that there were over 7000 participants from 160 countries, with at least a dozen from New Zealand (including David Carter, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry), and subsequently there have been over 1.8 million visits to the website.

It hardly needs be said that New Zealand forestry is not a stand-alone enterprise - it is an export industry and we are closely intertwined with attitudes and developments in other countries. When setbacks and opportunities in distant lands are described we sometimes experience a jolt of recognition, but in other cases there are major points of difference. In this issue, we give the perspectives of five New Zealand participants.

Demonstrating sustainability

Barbara Hock

The WFC2009 “Forests in development: A vital balance” had over 7,000 attendees and lasted for a week, with at times 14 parallel sessions. Many aspects of international forestry were showcased, including themes focused on sustainable forestry. In my view - in which I gather I’m not completely alone - the quantitative sciences perhaps held too much sway over sustainable forestry in New Zealand as we perceive it. Similarly, decision making in forestry seemed at times unperturbed by this concept of sustainability. If separating environmental from social criteria of sustainability means the perpetuation of powerlessness on the social level, does achieving an environmental gain still constitute a win for sustainability? If so, for whom? If “consulting stakeholders” constitutes being summoned by the forestry decision makers, did the forestry company actually believe consultation was achieved by commands - or was something lost in translation?

The conference covered many aspects of the qualitative sciences well: reviews of where we are at, techniques, frameworks, and technologies. It was not so proficient in understanding the effects of the above; in engaging outside the core forestry sector; and in demonstrating the benefit and value of forestry to society - such as the millions humming around us in Buenos Aires.

At times it was difficult to see what difference a piece of work made - another new sustainability framework, another new measure. Who is affected by it? Or are we doing this for the fun of the design process, the satisfaction of the methodology developed, or the creativity of a new technology? The examples varied enormously, from a simple yet practical barcode and cell phone system to track standing trees onto export ships (as implemented in a number of African countries) to superbly crafted generalities of political heavyweight organisations such as FAO. But to give credit to some of the international efforts, there were examples of countries putting very substantial amounts of money toward forest sustainability drives.

Intriguing were the insightful but highly politicised observations gained from networking events. An example from an embassy event: the Montreal Process¹ side-event

hadn’t excited some in the audience, as the Process had produced nothing novel. (If it had, how did so many other attempts at sustainability frameworks miss them)? But an appraisal of the “quiet pride” of the achievement of a cross-border framework by and for the participating countries showed some astute diplomatic listeners were present at the Congress. Unfortunately, generalisations dominated - given such brief presentation times, which hid much of the nuances or effectiveness of what was being described. At times strong personalities (stronger than session chairs?) carried a theme.

I came away with an insight into where much of the rest of the world is at, especially regarding the more technical aspects of demonstrating sustainability (much is theoretical - the practice is still evolving). I discovered some of the drivers of sustainable forestry (lack of social and environmental equity), some examples of what’s been tried and how it went (case studies), made new contacts, and developed a confidence that the science and sustainability measures used in NZ have the potential to achieve world ranking and recognition. Sustainable forestry has common themes but needs a better understanding of key concepts. The knowledge base is a large and changing field, with many worthwhile stories to tell - including that of New Zealand. And finally, I found that trying to fit far too much onto a PowerPoint slide and into a 12 minute talk is a world-wide problem.

¹ *The Working Group on Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests, known as the ‘Montréal Process’, was formed in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1994 to develop and implement internationally agreed Criteria and Indicators for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests. Membership is voluntary and currently includes countries from both hemispheres, incorporating a wide range of natural and social conditions. New Zealand is one of twelve member countries whose collective land area contains about ninety per cent of the world’s temperate and boreal forests which amount to sixty per cent of all of the forests of the world.*