

Lessons from the last 40 years

A view from a New Zealand Forester

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Almost 40 years ago I presented a paper titled "Proposals to improve the image of forestry as a career"¹ to a New Zealand Institute of Forestry conference. At that time the forestry profession was largely or totally unaware of such present day technologies and issues as:

- Personal computers, the internet and Power Point
- Mobile phones, twittering, tweeting and facebook
- Genetic modification
- Forest certification
- Climate change and emissions trading schemes
- Payment for the provision of environmental services
- Management of whole forests primarily for recreational purposes.

Totally unforeseen in 1971 was the 1987 disestablishment of the New Zealand Forest Service. This was a government department formed in 1919 and responsible for plantation and natural forests, forestry training, research, policy advice to government and many other functions. It was responsible for the management of over 50% of the plantation forest area in New Zealand. Many employees, including me, had joined it with the intention of remaining with it for our entire career.

Disestablishment of the Forest Service had a significant impact on employment of Institute of Forestry members. In 1971, about 70% of members were employed by the Forest Service, 10% by just two private forestry companies and 8% were private consultants or individuals.

A survey of NZIF members in early 2004 showed that 29% were employed in medium-large companies, 25% in small (1-5 person entities) and only 9% in central government.

So an indirect effect of the decision of the NZ government to exit its forestry business was a shift from the State employing the majority of professional foresters to the State employing only a small proportion. A significant proportion of our members are now self employed or working in very small companies - leading to potential problems of

isolation, limited opportunities for peer review of work, insufficient technical resources, problems in attending and funding continuous professional development and increasing conflicts between attracting and retaining clients whilst maintaining professional and ethical standards.

Prior to its disestablishment, the Forest Service provided much of the "glue" that held the forestry profession together. This resulted from its wide range of functions and the fact that it employed such a large proportion of Institute of Forestry members. Now, 23 years later, the Institute provides that "glue" by using a broad definition of forestry, by embracing membership by all professionals working in forestry, by setting and maintaining professional standards and by providing services for its members. Because individuals, not companies are the members, it provides a forum that cuts across vested interests.

What contributed to the disestablishment of the Forest Service? One reason was that forestry professionals were not listening to society. There was a strong movement against the management of NZ's indigenous forests for timber production and the conversion of indigenous forests to plantation forests of introduced species. There were those in our profession who considered that we knew best how to manage forests but we were not listening to, not hearing and not understanding the determination of society for a change. Professional foresters lost that argument and the demise of the Forest Service was one of the consequences.

Other changes that I have observed include:

- People today are less likely to look for a "career for life" than they used to. There is more movement in employment - between employers, across a wider range of jobs and even across a range of disciplines;
- Employment, recreation and family pressures leave less time to put into professional bodies and issues. Fewer of our members are willing or able to serve on committees, assist with the preparation of submissions or attend the events of their professional body;
- We have fewer "operational" government departments (like the former Forest Service) and more ministries, whose main function is policy advice. We have the development of the profession of "policy analysts" who may be history or law or public policy graduates and who move with ease between ministries preparing policy advice on a wide range of topics. Unfortunately such

¹ McEwen, A.D., 1971: *Proposals to improve the image of forestry as a career*. *New Zealand Journal of Forestry*, 16(2): 163-8



Forestry - where will it be in 40 years? (Photo courtesy of Euan Mason.)

analysts may not have any professional qualifications relating to the topic on which they give advice and certainly no operational experience against which they can test the practicality of that advice. While there are still some senior people in ministries who have appropriate professional qualifications and operational experience, many are close to retirement. I believe that the quality of policy advice has suffered, as has the quality of the policies. In a number of cases, good forestry has been the loser;

- There is more focus on the short term, without a good understanding of the long term consequences. While this year's cash flow is important, if you concentrate only on that you will never plant trees;
- Employees are more likely to expect their employer to pay the membership fees of their professional body and to pay for attendance at AGMs, workshops and conferences. If employer funding dries up, resignations from the professional body follow. Individuals appear to have less allegiance to their profession;
- Although an important part of the New Zealand economy, forestry is much smaller than agriculture and does not have the powerful lobby that agriculture has. Government forest policy is spread between several agencies (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Department of Conservation, Ministry for the Environment). This, combined with the loss of a dedicated operational and policy forestry department appears to have reduced the understanding of forestry by both Ministers and senior officials;

- An indirect effect of the reorganisation of the government's forestry functions is that many people associate the Institute of Forestry more with commercial forests and we struggle to attract and retain as members, employees of the Department of Conservation, even though that Department is responsible for around 60% of New Zealand's forest area;
- Forestry is seen by some as a sector in decline and not an attractive career option.

HOW TO SURVIVE THE NEXT 40 YEARS

What lessons can we learn from the changes in technology and issues that I have experienced through my chosen career? What pointers might it give us now as we face the future?

I have been grateful for the start I had through the NZ Forest Service trainee scheme, which included a forestry degree at Aberdeen University. Some of the important aspects were:

- It included a lot of practical field experience, including a full year working on a forest prior to starting university study;
- It included a good understanding of science (through a degree in botany, zoology, geology, chemistry and maths);

- It covered forestry in a broad sense (including topics as diverse as meteorology, soil science, processing, economics and surveying, along with silviculture, forest management, etc). A comprehensive forest management plan had to be prepared. It required integration of that knowledge in the final forestry exams, rather than examining the subjects as separate topics;
- It covered multiple use forestry;
- It required understanding and taking into account long term events - what sort of trees might we want in 30 or more years time, not what cash flow we need next month;
- It encouraged critical thinking - challenge the dogma rather than accepting it;
- There was no expectation that you were an instant expert or "superior" manager as soon as you had your qualification - for at least the first few years after graduation you went where you were posted to gain more on-the-job experience. Added responsibility came later;
- It developed life long friendships and networks;
- It introduced you to your professional body. In my first year of training my boss said one day - there is an Institute meeting in town tonight, the bus leaves at 6:30 pm and you will be on it;
- It helped you to develop an understanding of professional ethics.

I contend that the combination of education, training and background that I received are as valuable today as they were earlier in my career.

While some of that training and background are still accessible to those entering the workforce today, others are not. Some universities still offer broadly based undergraduate forestry courses, including some science background, and one that helps develop the ability to think long term. But there is a trend for more specialisation than we had and therefore the possibility of missing out on some important topics. There has also been a rise in the number of environmental, ecological, recreational and landscape courses that are quite separate from forestry courses.

There is encouragement for undergraduates to gain practical experience, but it is less structured and reliant on many, often small, individual employers providing opportunities (and these fluctuate with the financial state of the forestry sector). There also appears to be greater expectations that new graduates have been trained at university (rather than educated²) and less provision of on-the-job training and mentoring than we experienced. Thus the new graduates are more likely to be thrust into positions of greater responsibility (and to expect more remuneration) than graduates of 40 years ago.

Depending on individual employers there is likely to be less pressure to join and participate in a professional

body. The life pressures on young graduates and the trend towards embracing more than one sector or profession during the working life are more likely to discourage active participation in such bodies. This reduces the opportunity to develop networks and to learn about professional matters as opposed to day to day employment issues. Professional ethics as well as the fortunes of professional bodies suffer.

For survival we need to reverse these trends.

² Education and training are not synonymous. The sense in which I use them is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (8th Edition, 1990):

Educate - give intellectual, moral and social instruction especially as a formal and prolonged process

Train - teach a specified skill, especially by practice

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