

Forestry's Green Footprint

Forestry has always been unfairly scrutinised for its environmental performance. For example, you rarely hear the words 'monoculture', 'biodiversity' or 'aesthetics' in connection with a paddock of pasture, a vineyard, or a herd of cows. But prolonged public attention has meant that the forestry sector is now squeaky clean: the environmental contrast between forestry and other land uses is even stronger. As an official recognition of our sustainability, we have embraced Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification – the Theme of this issue. This should enhance access to environmentally aware markets.

One problem with environmental standards devised by non-experts is that there is a considerable cloud of myth surrounding forestry: cultural attitudes not based on evidence. Many of these arose in Central Europe in the period when forestry was a respected profession before it became a science. These legends are maintained and mutated by a sort of inter-generational Chinese Whispers, without recourse to recent observations or scientific fact.

For example, many people believe that pines cause permanent deterioration in soil quality – at least this factoid was spouted ad nauseam before the massive 2007 conversions of fourth-generation pine forests to dairy pasture (with no complaints from the new farmers!). Some people still say that “nothing ever grows under pines” – which is refuted by the cover of this issue and by anyone who has ever driven through a pine forest. Similarly, the word ‘monoculture’ still crops up repeatedly in this context. This writer has counted 64 native plant species in a single plot of pine trees, and by way of contrast – many days walk inside a national park – only one solitary epiphytic fern in a silver beech plot. And furthermore: ryegrass, sheep, cattle and even humans are all “worse” monocultures – if indeed monocultures are a problem at all.

In another example, it is generally believed that “selective logging” is somehow more natural and preferable to “clearfelling” (emotion-laden word), but even our native New Zealand bush seems to exist in sizeable even-aged patches as a result of past disturbances. In other words, Nature seems to use clearfelling. Again, there is a prevailing view that softwoods are intrinsically inferior to hardwoods – not that most people can often distinguish between them. Yet in pioneering countries like New Zealand, softwoods (kauri, rimu, totara) were always preferred ahead of hardwoods (beech, tawa, rata) – for good practical reasons. In several European countries subsidies favour hardwoods, and these are more popular aesthetically. Large, light-green leaves and sometimes colourful flowers compare well to sombre, damp and shady conifers.

In the last few months, this editor had the good fortune to explore large areas of the German Black Forest. It was spring and the experience was a delight. Although

artificial (most of the land was planted in recent history), the forest has been manicured to accommodate every public preconception of what a forest should look like. The regions of greatest pride are those with an intimate mixture of species and tree ages; those where the much-loved trees of local origin are well represented; where the deer and other woodland creatures thrive; and where logging coupes are small and discrete. And in addition German exports of rough-sawn softwood are not insubstantial.

But the skeleton in the cupboard is the high level of subsidisation from the taxpayer. Germany is an industrial nation, and the forests are a psychological necessity for urban recreation – their timber profitability is of lesser importance. Thus German foresters can use (by New Zealand standards) ridiculously low or non-existent discount rates – they do not need to compete fairly on the sharemarket with other possible investments. In New Zealand, the lack of new-land planting in recent decades indicates that a 5-6% real rate of return from timber was clearly insufficient incentive – but even this low figure would be unthinkable in Germany. Their taxpayer subsidies can be justified as a sort of payment for environmental services, including tourism and reduction in urban drift.

The urban-based and overseas cultural attitudes that lie behind the FSC have created some impossible hurdles: we must phase out Gardoprime, Velpar, and 1080; we must spurn the benefits of genetic engineering (including sterile trees that eliminate wilding risk); we must set aside 10% of plantation area as preservation reserves of natural forests. That last obstacle is particularly unjust, because New Zealand has a full 30% of its entire land area already set aside for non-extractive uses – a figure substantially higher than Germany could boast. What justification is there for defining the boundaries of FSC-compliance at company level rather than regional or national level? And, as already mentioned, biodiversity is nearly always enhanced by conversion of marginal farmland to plantations. No other crop must forgo 10% of their land for a non-productive purpose.

Our sector, emboldened by the truth, should march fearlessly into FSC and challenge our opponents to provide supporting evidence for their prejudices. The benefits of forestry – familiar to all readers of this editorial – need to be restated incessantly to the wider community until the messages get through: plantations provide a highly productive and sustainable source of fibre and energy on steep marginal hillsides, without ravishing natural and sacred forests which are thereby spared the axe; wood consists almost entirely of a solar-powered combination of greenhouse gas and rainwater; our forests are oil-wells that never run dry. We can hold our heads up high and face down the critics. We are the true Greenies.

Piers Maclaren