

## Mountainland researcher

### John Young (JY) Morris (1929-2012)

Snow lay thick on the Christchurch ground on June 7, the funeral day for John (JY) Morris a keen skier and mountaineer. Similarly, his friend and colleague, geologist Colin O'Loughlin had been farewelled by a whacking great earthquake early last year.

John joined the State Forest Service on 15 January 1948, one of an intake of Technical Trainees notable for remaining in forestry and contributing much to it for their entire working lives. At the end of their first year of service they could opt to enter the management stream or study for a forestry degree; John chose the latter. With no school of forestry in New Zealand, the pattern was first to obtain a B.Sc. in New Zealand (which John completed at Canterbury), before going on to an overseas university to study forestry. Atypically, John asked to be sent to Nancy and, after his competence in French had been certified, the department agreed.

On his return he worked on beech management at Ahaura for three years before joining the Forest and Range Experiment Station (F&RES) at Rangiora – part of the Forest Research Institute – under Jack Holloway. The group consisted of foresters, hydrologists, grassland ecologists, animal ecologists and people of other disciplines, focussed on analysing the problems of mountain watersheds and, where possible, developing remedial techniques. John was closely involved with establishing the high country Craigieburn research station and research trial area and the accompanying revegetation research as well as climate and hydrology studies. He also helped to plan and undertake surveys in the main mountain areas, to assess the vegetation and watershed condition and trends; the information gained fed directly into management decisions on animal control priorities.

In the mid-60s he took advantage of the long experience of the Austrians in mountain reforestation research and, located at Patscherkofel, undertook a study of the growth and survival of seedlings at high altitude. A strategy employed by FRI, then and later, was to send people for overseas study to make international contacts and bring back new knowledge and information on the latest technology. And so it was with John; he was impressed by a complex piece of equipment developed by the Austrians (technically called a phytocyclon but usually referred to as the “wind tunnel”) which, oversimplifying, allowed the testing of candidate plants under simulated severe mountain conditions.

Since much emphasis was being placed on the revegetation of eroded mountain lands here, on his return John obtained Government approval to develop our own wind tunnel, a costly project. Had its potential been realised it would have been a valuable tool for testing candidate plant species. But, alas, the

sophisticated technology proved too challenging for the contractor trying to develop it over far too long a period, and the term “wind tunnel” became one to be avoided. Not all good ideas succeed.

In the early 1970s he undertook a two-year watershed management project in the Philippines for UNDP/FAO.

In mid-1973, Jack Holloway stepped aside from the position of Director and John succeeded him. Not generally known at that time, there were moves afoot to re-locate the F&RES (now called Protection Forestry Division), taking it away from the Forest Service entirely and placing it in a different government department. Behind the scenes machinations were already taking place and the issue had reached the level of the National Research Advisory Council, a body advising the government on the organisation of government research.

NRAC reviewed this question again after John's appointment; they were impressed by him and the enthusiastic research group and came away reassured that the Division was indeed relevant to forestry and properly placed in the Forest Service. So the issue of re-location went no further. It was at this time that the Division's activities began to trend away from being almost entirely engaged on high country issues and to increasingly take up the study of pressing forestry problems at lower altitudes – such as the effect of forest operations on erosion, slope stability and stream flow, and the whole question of possum control.

As Director, John was very good at getting the resources needed; this included a comprehensive programme of providing the new labs with modern equipment, which proceeded well and ushered in an era of more active experimental scientific research. Effective field work was greatly assisted by John's excellent rapport with regional Conservancy staff all over the country. And his sharp wit, down to earth practicality, and love of the backcountry always shone through. With highly competent research leaders and scientists, the Protection Forestry Division of FRI became internationally recognised for the quality of its research and could rightly claim to be scientifically on a par with equivalent divisions of DSIR and other research organisations.

On a personal note, John liked building houses with his own hands: one during his working life, then over the next 10 years building, renovating and finishing several more. John retired in 1986 and some years later was unfortunately overtaken by a debilitating condition that persisted until his death on 1 June.

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