

Help make forestry a positive career choice

David Evison and Justin Morgenroth

The New Zealand School of Forestry at the University of Canterbury has started a campaign to increase the intake of undergraduates. The school is into the second year of implementing a marketing plan, the main objective of which is to see 40 first year students enrolling in forestry science and 12 second year students in forest engineering. We believe this is a realistic and responsible target from the point of view of the employment opportunities available to our graduating students.

As a generalisation, our forestry science students enjoy the outdoors and many are also interested in the environment. Some have a family connection to forestry. At high school they might enjoy biology or geography and have a reasonable aptitude for mathematics. Each year there are probably more than 40 students who fit this profile and complete their high school education and who would enjoy a forestry education and career in forestry.

While we are still learning what the most effective ways to market the School of Forestry, we are talking to Year 12 and Year 13 students – and their teachers, advisors and parents – with the aim of ensuring that forestry is an option they consider. We are targeting careers events and open days, and visiting schools where possible. Some of the feedback we are getting is somewhat disturbing, and should be of interest to the profession generally.

Our current students report that very few teachers or careers advisors are aware of the forestry degree at all, let alone the course content, with its almost unique mix of science and management. The closest equivalent is the Bachelor of Agricultural Science, which is much better known and understood. Forestry is not seen as a career choice by many of those advising our secondary school students on their options, and they are not aware of the many career pathways which are open to a forestry graduate. It is assumed that everyone in forestry is using a chain saw eight hours a day.

Those advising students do not know enough about the contribution that forestry makes to the New Zealand economy, particularly as an export earner. The future potential for forestry to grow by increases in harvesting and processing in the shorter term, and further new land planning in the longer term, is not known. It is therefore not seen as a promising opportunity.

Many of the images of forestry that main influencers of our Year 12 and Year 13 students have are overwhelmingly negative –

- Logging truck accidents
- Logging injuries and fatalities
- Erosion and debris flows following logging

- Concern about poor financial returns from forestry
- Worry about drug use among forestry workers
- Exporting logs rather than processed products
- Forestry is just owned by overseas companies.

All are mentioned, and there are very few positive features to counterbalance the negative impression created. We have heard parents categorically say they would not want their child working in forestry.

We are raising these concerns because they clearly constitute a challenge to us achieving our marketing goals. We also believe they should be a cause for concern among professional foresters and the forestry sector generally. The profile and image of the industry requires a continuing effort to ensure that the positive messages concerning the forestry sector are out there. These messages include –

- Our sector is highly regarded, with the significant foreign investment in growing and processing
- The sector will grow in size, and there are opportunities for considerable growth
- Those opportunities are positive for the environment – by many definitions this country's forestry is sustainable – and for New Zealand's economic growth
- If we are interested in removing carbon from the atmosphere, planting new forest is the only proven practice that can do so on a significant scale. While the land available to plant is finite, it is sufficient to provide the space necessary to develop and implement technologies which emit less carbon.
- Wood is the third largest renewable energy source in New Zealand and most of the industrial use is by the wood processing industries and overall, this industry is the energy user which is closest to energy self-sufficiency
- Forestry is New Zealand's third largest earner of merchandise exports.

The message needs to be coordinated across the whole sector, and there has to be a long-term commitment to presenting it to a wide audience. The message also needs to be well reasoned. We should be able to 'toot our own horn' without sounding evangelical, and speak optimistically about the future without setting improbable goals and targets that give us a reputation for over-promising and under-delivering. The question is – How do we organise and coordinate these messages so that forestry receives the level of positive recognition that it deserves? This is one opportunity where the sector could speak with one voice.

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