

Shifting the culture of development policy

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Forestry is not about trees, it is about people. And it is about trees only insofar as trees can serve the needs of people.

(Jack Westoby, 1990)

A fellow forester and I were having coffee – which he complained about because it wasn't sourced green from some hillside plot in Uganda or Ethiopia and then mixed and roasted quite to his taste – and discussing the policy framing of what is unfortunately called 'development'. He has worked in Africa and Asia on behalf of mainly European countries and world policy organisations like the World Bank. We were talking about 'the experts' to whom life was simple. You establish something primary, shove it through a linear processing chain, link it to a market, and Bob's your uncle, 'Development!'

I remembered Dennis Richardson (1994), whose prose I miss, referring to failed development. One example he gave was of some brilliant plan devised from afar, involving lots of quanta, wherein a fuelwood 'resource' should be established to provide heating for the tobacco factory. Unfortunately, and predictably, the tobacco plant closed down. And the *Eucalyptus* resource was incompatible with the local culture. Richardson suggested that the planting of something that was far more compatible with the culture of place, and their multiple needs, might have been worth a thought.

My friend laughed and said that they don't work like that anymore. They look to the underlying functions that make up a place, and it isn't simply 'resource' and infrastructure. There is a whole 'political ecology' framing. Look to not just the infrastructure and resource nouns, but the culture, politics, institutions and power relations within a place. The complex.

I was complimentary. Systems thinking. Looking at the broader framework of making life better. He said it was interesting that the systems approach of development was now coming back to us so much more sophisticated 'western' countries.

I cannot help but contrast that approach, broad and connected to a socio-ecological system, with the one we still take to woodland development in New Zealand. The most appalling example was the East Coast Forestry Scheme where the scope of potential of necessary woodlands in the landscape – the scope of all the socio-ecological mutualisms – wasn't considered; wasn't even imagined. Plants lots of trees, geared to scale and corporate agents.

In contrast, the best example from the past was arguably the NZ Forest Service Forestry Encouragement Grants in lieu of tax deductibility. That scheme was not – as some described it – simply a dishing out of cash. They had staff who were connected to the local

agricultural culture, as much friends and motivators as instructive. Social, connected and technical. The soft and the hard. Similar to the political ecology framing of modern development work.

I welcome our 'right tree, right place' look at the potential for other than one species in these hill country landscapes. However, we need an appropriate socio-ecological context. These places are not simply socially-divorced 'resources'. And we need to use the appropriate scale that matches potential synergies. A farm-sized 500 ha pixel would be yet another disaster.

The real potential lies in the people and in the synergies of integrated land uses where you can get all of these positive – better economic, social and environmental – outcomes.

Woodlands – and we ought to include wetlands – are 'keystone' features within especially hill country landscapes. They suit the spatial patterns of pastoral costs and returns (often ignored in comparisons), they suit the environmental functions, they suit a varied approach to forestry, and they create mutualisms. But don't evaluate them as two distinct and averaged dichotomies to be compared and contrasted, or added as a 'crop' without reference to spatial patterns and connections (using farm averages is a nonsense), because you won't see the mutualisms that way.

There are so many mutualisms, and yet such strong cultural contrasts. A small proportion of farm forestry enthusiasts (who have retired on their forestry returns from 'useless' pastoral gullies), and a strong adversarial cadre of died-in-the-woodchip blanket pastoralists and foresters, throwing spreadsheet numbers at each other ... signifying nothing.

There was nothing 'rational' here. It was deeply cultural. It made me wonder about how completely immersed we are in our worldview. The ontologies of rural land. Blanket land use, socially-divorced, economies of scale not scope, seeing either/or competition rather than and-and mutualisms.

Which comes back to the coffee with my peripatetic friend. New Zealand needs more woodlands. But I think we need to stop thinking industrially, and start to see this land and its people as a complex system. Then, we might be able to achieve something good instead of driving wedges through peoples' hearts.

References

- Richardson, S.D. 1994. Economics and Ethics: Approaches to Sustainable Forest Management. *New Zealand Journal of Forestry*, 39(1): 17–20.
- Westoby, Jack. 1990. *The Purpose of Forests: Follies of Development*. London, UK: Blackwell Publishing.



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