

The dangers of invisibility

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It has been my privilege to have worked in the forestry and seafood industries, two of our great primary industries. Combined they generate \$8 billion in export earnings and employ 52,000 people in primary production and processing. Plantation forests are ubiquitous in our rural landscapes, most of us live in houses built from plantation grown timbers, an increasing number of us enjoy recreation in plantation forests, most of us have seen inshore fishing boats leaving and entering harbours around the country, and almost all of us enjoy fish and chips and seafood from the supermarket.

Why then are these two great industries largely invisible in our media unless things go wrong. Does invisibility matter? It is not as if this a new phenomenon or unique to forestry and commercial fishing.

Prima facie, decades of unbalanced, incorrect and deliberately misleading media (mainstream and social) coverage has had limited direct impact on the growth of both sectors. The pressure on legislators and industry generated by the cumulative impact of informed and uninformed commentary has, however, seen very significant changes in the way we operate. Examples that spring to mind include the almost complete cessation of all indigenous timber production since the passing of the Forests (West Coast Accord) Act 2020, the NZ Forest Accord of August 1991 that brought an end to conversion of indigenous forest to plantations, and the Fisheries Act 1996 which established New Zealand's world-leading fisheries management regime. More recent examples include the sweeping changes to environmental law described by Fowler and Buddle in issue 65(3): 2020 of this journal, and the introduction of a wide range of new electronic reporting and monitoring requirements for commercial fishers (see the *Digital Monitoring of Commercial Fishing* page of the Ministry for Primary Industries website).

By and large, changes in operating rules represent negotiated compromises arrived at either directly between interested parties or through our legislative processes. Successful negotiation, and hence liveable compromises, depend on good information and shared understanding of issues. Successful compromises cannot be built on misinformation or irreconcilable worldviews (the demise of industry-owned fisheries research partnership Trident Systems LP is a case in point).

Markets are often the arbitrator between differing views on the most appropriate use of resources. Market forces have, at different times, resulted in large areas of grazing land being converted to plantations and of plantations and sheep and beef farms being converted to dairy. Markets are not perfect. The availability of grants and tax write-offs encouraged conversion to plantations in the 1980s, and the right to discharge nitrogen and abstract water at no cost has had a strong bearing on dairy conversions.

Ecosystem services models are an attempt to bring rigour to valuing the benefits and costs generated by ecosystems and the production systems they support (see issue 61(4): 2017 of this journal for three excellent papers on the topic). In an ideal world all ecosystem services would be valued and the costs and benefits of service consumption imputed into land value to promote optimal land use, given the value society places on the services an ecosystem produces. The paper by Monge, Parker and Pizzirani identifying complementarities for the dairy and forest industries in the Central North Island in issue 61(4): 2017 of this journal is an example. Even if the practical problems of monetising ecosystem services could be addressed, the recent coverage of farmer objections to the conversion of sheep and beef farms to trees demonstrates how hard it is to overcome the urge to legislate when the monetisation of a previously free ecosystem service produces an answer we do not like.

In the absence of fully informed markets, we will continue to rely on regulation to resolve competition for access to resources and the services that ecosystems generate. Regulations should be based on well-informed compromise and not favour the loudest voice in the room. Persistent communication of facts and the continued development of tools such as ecosystem services models will help keep the debates balanced. Harnett and Payn in issue 65(3): 2020 of this journal has an excellent discussion of the communication challenge in a post-fact world. Most important of all, however, is that what we actually do on the ground and at sea that matters. No amount of good communication or sophisticated modelling will offset the damage done when we breach our own rules, standards and undertakings.

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