

A new step change

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A step change is defined as a large and/or sudden change, especially in business or government. In 1987, New Zealand forestry went through a major step change. The Forest Service which had managed the state's forests for nearly 70 years was abolished. Much of its indigenous forest estate was taken over by the new Department of Conservation and state-owned exotic commercial forests were subsequently sold to the private sector. The remaining state-owned commercial indigenous forests were closed to timber management in 2002.

These changes set the pattern for the next three decades and have become the norm. Most forest managers now see themselves as working for commercially-oriented plantation forest owners, usually in the form of international corporations, timber investment organisations or small private landowners.

Enough history, on to the present. It seems to me that New Zealand forestry is now entering a new step change, the first since 1987. This step change has been occurring for several years, but perhaps foresters have been so busy dealing with the consequences that they haven't had time to acknowledge just how rapidly it has happened! This major step change underlies the theme of this issue – Management of Permanent Forests – and the drivers for it are succinctly described in Tim Payn's leading article, as follows:

'New Zealand needs to look after its existing forests and develop new ones if we are to respond to the multiple challenges of climate change, biodiversity and environmental degradation, and the need to shift to a zero or low carbon economy.'

Tim then shows how the dichotomy of privately-owned commercial exotic plantations versus state-owned indigenous conservation forests that was created in 1987 needs to be replaced by a more diverse classification – one that recognises that all forests can provide both marketable and non-marketable goods and services, differing only in the proportions they provide of the different goods and services. Multiple use by another name, perhaps.

This more diverse approach to forest classification and management is reinforced in the papers by Sean Weaver, Peter Casey et al. and Adam Forbes. Both Sean Weaver and Casey et al. make the case for use of

exotic plantation forests to achieve the twin goals of indigenous forest restoration and sustainable carbon sequestration.

Casey et al. note that permanent forests using exotic plantation forest are not simply a case of plant and leave. These forests need an active management programme to deliver short-term carbon benefits, while also ensuring the long-term succession to a biodiverse indigenous forest ecosystem. Adam Forbes describes a more conventional approach to restoring indigenous forests on the east coast of the South Island. But his recommendations still entail an active ecosystem management approach – the control of both pest and domestic animals, enrichment planting, mimicked forest disturbance, fire protection and the control of plant pests are all required.

So the new types of forests being created due to this step change still need management, just of a different kind. New Zealand forest managers are adapting to these changing needs but there are important challenges to meet. One is in the area of education. For a generation now, forestry education has focused on commercial exotic plantation forest management, for good reason. Not least of all, it was what the forestry employers wanted. The new educational challenge is to cover the wider range of skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for the more diverse forestry of the future without falling into the trap of teaching everything 'once over lightly'.

The second major challenge relates to the management of existing forests. The diverse forests described by our authors are being created to meet the expectations of a new type of owner, focused as much on carbon sequestration and ecosystem services as they are on timber harvesting. Thus, there is no mismatch between these owners' expectations and the way the new forests will be managed.

In contrast, most existing exotic plantation forests were acquired or planted as strict commercial timber investments, yet the management of some of these forests must change in order to meet the multiple challenges described by Tim Payn. Here the challenge is to find ways to make a 'just transition' to forest management systems where a forest owner's financial objectives are balanced with society's expectations. It won't be an easy challenge to meet, but we have to do it if we are to make this new step change successfully.



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