

# Holding out for a hero

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Didn't we just scrape in with the August NZIF conference in Masterton! As we were descending off the field trip buses in the pouring rain on the last day of our conference, word had seeped out that COVID was back. Phones were ringing, attendees rushed for cars and to make flights, and by midnight of that day we were back in lockdown. How lucky were we?

I have been to many NZIF conferences over the years. My first was in 1997, but this one was hard to beat for the palpable 'band camp' sense of excitement. Everyone was happy just to be out of their homes and offices. This sense of camaraderie cemented what I think our sector has been needing for some time – some genuine human connection.

The conference theme this year was 'Pride and Passion in Forestry', but the real subject that came through in the presentations was communication. Or should I say, lack of it. Our sector seems to have a good grasp of what is wrong, but we are light on any detail of how to fix it. We have the 'why', but not the 'how'. How do we communicate better – with each other, with the public, and with our government?

While we are arguing the stats and facts with various fringe groups, we are stagnant with any real vision for the future. In his conference discussion paper, Warren Parks uses the poignant quote, 'We cannot build a future that we have not first imaged.' I find this to be thought-provoking. Our sector needs to have an 'I have a dream!' moment to start this journey towards a clear vision. We have the pride and the passion, there is no doubt, with all the information we need at our fingertips. But how do we inspire and convey this to a misinformed public, and to a government becoming increasingly transfixed on regulating our sector and far less on incentivising it? While, at the same time, conflicting demands increase for our forest outputs. Do we even have the capability to deliver it while our leaders deny that there is any problem to start with, smug in their belief that 'time will tell' and 'we were right all along'?

We don't have time. 2050 is only about one forest rotation away, and the new Ministry for the Environment discussion paper on their Climate Change Action Plan

hints that we need five new Kaingaroa forests planted now if we have any hope of meeting targets. It's unlikely that this scale of planting is going to endear us to the public, with our current stance of belligerently defending our position and throwing around rebuttal statistics to answer valid community concerns.

At this year's conference, there was large cohort of younger attendees. Students from Toi Ohomai, Future Foresters and a mix of younger staff from forestry companies added to fresh discussions. Fifty students from Rathkeale College's Agribusiness classes were sponsored to attend the conference and they certainly had their eyes opened. They were amazed at the passion of the presenters, the breadth of our sector and the wealth of information they were exposed to. Following the conference, at least three students have signed up for the University of Canterbury's School of Forestry for 2022 from those classes.

These younger people do not care about arguing the facts and stats, or even the science behind forestry. They are buying into our dream, and once they have the desire, they will search out their own reality. They saw how we love trees, how our sector wants to improve our environment, and contribute to something greater than ourselves while making good returns, and these are the messages our sector has for all New Zealanders.

People are tribal – we all want to belong to something. In our forestry club we plant trees we might never see harvested and feel good about it. We believe we are providing an increasingly essential product to a world searching for alternatives. We also feel we are part of a future that is correcting climate change and trying to 'save the world' while providing for our economy a renewable and sustainable resource. For isn't that what everyone wants – to be the hero?

Three other conference presenters have provided papers in this issue. Tim Payn looks at the myths and misperceptions around plantation forestry. Beth Welden discusses Australia's ForestLearning education programme for school students. Finally, Bert Hughes and Gordon Wong examine forest investment for individuals.



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