

It makes you proud....

.... to be a member of the Institute of Forestry. The Institute's brilliant conference in April focused on non-wood values and environmental services that forests provide. Speakers comprised leading lights on a range of issues including climate change, biofuels, culture and recreation, soil stabilization, habitat, and governance. The organizers, adroitly led by Andrew McEwen, should be congratulated for a conference that explicitly acknowledged changes in perceptions of forestry.

Since the mid-1980s the public has perceived plantation forestry as more about money than forests, with other considerations very minor themes at best. An earlier Institute conference in Wellington in 1986 hosted Hon. Koro Wetere, then Minister of Forests, who said that the Forest Service would be divided into two: an indigenous forestry agency with a preservation ethic; and a State Owned Enterprise wholly focused on making money from plantations. During question time I pointed out that many Forest Service employees were involved in neither indigenous forestry nor explicit money making, and asked him how such a sharp division could be rational. His response was typical during an era when those affected by change were deliberately excluded from decision-making: "Yes, that is what we are going to do".

Meanwhile smart companies employed environmental foresters to manage non-wood services of plantations, and sought environmental certification for their estates so that those values could be openly acknowledged. Kiwi habitat and a refuge for endangered New Zealand Falcons are only the most visible elements of a large array of benefits that people enjoy from exotic plantations. That wood production is the key to the provision of those benefits comes as no surprise to professional foresters but has yet to dawn on a public that still believes all is well in native forests now that chainsaws have been excluded from them. Meanwhile our Department of Conservation (DOC) lacks the funding required to manage our native forests sustainably.

Ecki Brockerhoff's presentation on biodiversity in plantations was described as a "challenge" by a representative of DOC. It certainly was a challenge, but perhaps in more ways than the DOC employee imagined. They were challenged not just to recognize that exotic plants can play a conservation role, but also that zoning forests into productive and non-productive, single-use categories brings significant costs.

The widely held perception that plantation corporates have a single-minded focus on money has cost our sector dearly. People enjoy investing in enterprises that provide a variety of benefits. In addition, the labyrinth of regulations that companies navigate in order to operate may be streamlined when regulators appreciate the services that plantations provide for the community.

For indigenous forests the challenge is to find solutions

to the problem of habitat degradation that are sustainable not only ecologically, but also socially and economically. Relying on solely tax money for their management isn't working. The cost of fanciful ideas about how to operate financially unproductive forests is a continuing decline in habitat.

Prevailing definitions of forests are also being challenged. A couple of years ago I gave a presentation to the Christchurch branch of the Royal Society on management of NZ's indigenous forests and proposed a series of options for their future. During the talk I displayed an image of the forest behind the Queenstown gondola and asked how many had been there. More than 90% raised their hands. When I asked who in the audience could identify the species (Douglas fir), two people raised their hands (one of the hands belonged to Piers Maclaren). To the question, "Who would say that this is a native forest?" roughly 80% raised their hands. We love our native forests, but apparently very few of us can reliably distinguish them from exotic ones.

So, in the words of the previous journal editor, "Where to from here?" I look forward to a future when the public appreciates the diverse benefits of forests and forestry, but I'm concerned that so few people can distinguish native forests from exotic ones. It is ironic that someone who has just written gleefully about the blurring of boundaries in our extreme zoning model of forestry would harbour this concern. Our native forest ecosystems are unique and they contribute significantly to our identities as New Zealanders. Moreover, the ability to recognise indigenous forests is surely critical for the public to value them. I'm afraid that as people fail to distinguish exotic from indigenous organisms they will be unconcerned that our native forests are compromised by depredations of exotic pests and weeds. It's hard to care about a process that you can't see.

Enough musing. Congratulations again to the conference organising committee for an excellent event.

Euan Mason

New Journal editor



Euan Mason, the new Editor of the New Zealand Journal of Forestry, is an Associate Professor at the New Zealand School of Forestry, University of Canterbury. His research interests lie in forest modelling, silviculture, wood properties and decision-support. Euan replaces Bruce Manley. Many thanks for your efforts, Bruce.