
Aotearoa/New Zealand: Absolutely positively NOT forests

The New Zealand Institute of Forestry is organizing its 2006 conference under the title of “absolutely positively forests”. Although the title is open to discussion about its true –and probably very profound- meaning, our understanding is that it could either mean that the meeting will: 1) be absolutely and positively focused on forests or 2) will try to convince everyone that Radiata pine plantations are absolutely and positively forests.

Unfortunately, the latter appears to be true. As usual, the forestry industry and its supporters try to confuse the uniformed public by mixing forests and plantations. For instance, the brochure produced by the organizers explains that “forests provide soil and water conservation, biodiversity and wildlife habitat”, which is of course absolutely true. But then it goes on to say that forests also produce other services and goods among which “timber and paper”.

However, the fact is that New Zealand’s forests are not very much used for timber and not at all for the production of paper. Most timber and all paper pulp come from the 1.8 million hectares of plantations –mostly alien Radiata pine- that have occupied the place of native forests. The organizers are therefore including these plantations as forests, thus hiding that not only do they not conserve soils, water, biodiversity and wildlife habitat, but that they impact negatively on all of them.

In such context, it is important to learn about the extent of deforestation in New Zealand. The country occupies approximately 27 million hectares of land and -according to official sources- it is “estimated that in pre-Polynesian times 78 percent of the total area (21 million ha) was under forest cover.” It would of course be more honest –and less racist- to say what percentage was still under forest cover “in Pre-European times”. While estimates vary, it is averaged around 65% forest cover at the arrival of the European, a loss of 13% in around 800 to one thousand years of occupation by Maori. Compare this with the current situation, where only 23.5 % of the total landmass is currently covered in forest (and less than half of that is truly primary forest area) and we begin to get a picture of the aggressive nature of the deforestation of this country. That most of this deforestation occurred within 100 years of European settlement provides us with an interesting contrast.

In any case, the current situation is that only 23.5% of the land area is still in Indigenous forest, while 51% is pasture and arable land and 7.7% monoculture tree plantations (so-called “planted production forest”).

The above would imply the urgent need of a forest conference focused on the rehabilitation of native forests and not on the further expansion of alien tree monocultures. However, this is not the case in the 2006 conference. Looking at the programme, at the invited participants and at the issues to be discussed, it is clear that much of the discussion will be focused on plantations and not on forests.

Of course this makes much sense for industrial interests that are planning to increase the plantation area to 2.5 million hectares by 2010, which would see 9.5% of the total landmass under alien tree plantations. The conference will provide them with the necessary good image –and “scientific” backing- to move ahead with their plans.

To make matters worse, the plantation industry has also managed to influence young forestry students, who have also been made to believe that plantations are forests. For instance some of the presentations at the “forum for students and recent graduates” organized as part of the conference are “Environmental and social values of plantation forests in New Zealand”, “Some physiological bases to explain the influence of nutrition and genotype on growth of *Pinus radiata* D.Don”, “The ecological requirements of New Zealand bush falcon in plantation forestry” and “Management of plantation forests for biodiversity”.

All very sad.

However, there is always the hope that during the conference someone –a student, a forester, an environmentalist, a Maori, a woman or a man- will stand up and tell these people what is pretty obvious: that Radiata pine plantations are absolutely and positively NOT forests!

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