

Should we be logging our indigenous forests?

by Professor John Morton

The following article by Professor John Morton, one of New Zealand's most eminent ecologists and a Distinguished Life Member of Forest and Bird, was first published in New Zealand Environment. It provides an important individual perspective on our indigenous forests and is reproduced as a contribution to the development of an Indigenous Forest Policy. Here he criticises the former Labour Government's proposals for the "sustainable" logging for export of native trees. National supports these proposals, but at its post-election conference Labour came out in support of a total and permanent ban on the export of native woodchips, logs and timber.

TODAY, IT COULD have been realistic for all our indigenous forests – publicly and privately owned – to be reprieved from logging. New Zealand could have shown such an example of forbearance at far less sacrifice than our near-Pacific neighbours.

Under the former Labour Government's forestry policy it isn't yet going to happen. Not that the whole policy is to be scoffed at. Their first statement has been strengthened by an interim ban on all exports of native timber, chip or saw-log. Announced, significantly, by then-Deputy Prime Minister Helen Clark, this took some political courage. It was clearly intended as a principled stand. Probably it was touched off by the wanton massacre of beech in Southland by owners trying to beat the new policy.

The pity is that the new policy, when its details emerge, is not likely to halt damage to our indigenous forests. It may create pressures to increase it. The Government has accepted bad ecological advice. If their policy comes into force it would offer a loophole through which timber products can be exported, if they are certified to have been logged under an approved regime of sustained yield management.

Preserved intact

What does the Government intend this formula to mean? For there's an immense difference between a natural resource, like a hay paddock or a snapper fishery or a pine forest, that can be harvested for ongoing return; and a heritage forest, scarce, wonderful, slow-growing, that may cry out to be preserved intact.

Under "sustained yield management", anything taken out from the mature end of a population is replaced continuously by something almost as mature, coming on. This can happen with pines, and in European deciduous forests. No one with any knowledge believes that it could be done with 5-8 century-old rimu or totara. These have the wrong-shaped population curve: an 'inverse-J'. There are two or three centuries of age gap, with nothing middle-aged, until, centuries ahead, today's striplings begin to mature. If they ever do, neither we nor any people like us will be around to see the result.

The Government has now been persuaded

(and the Maruia Society alone among conservation bodies insists on going along with them) that sustained yield management is possible with beech. Here is a tree coveted for chipping and pulping to make a paper of special quality they like in Japan. It has a maturing age of only about a century. Its curve is not J-shaped. And it's perfectly true that when you cut down a beech you can get more to grow.

It is a long way from this to talk about sustaining an old and mature forest in the form we have come to value and love. We don't know yet what the sustained yield protocol would look like. It is likely to allow a much heavier take than the "selection logging" that we had by now thought altogether discredited for North Island podocarp forests.

What some of the industry have in mind would hardly preserve the integrity of an old mature forest. L S King, Executive Director of Wood Export Tokanui Ltd, wrote (*New Zealand Listener* 11 June, 1990) that although the present proportion of chip logs from Southland is about three times that of saw logs, this is only because virgin beech forests are "very over mature". "Managed stands will reverse this ratio to four to one in favour of saw-logs. Thus the wood quality of managed beech is vastly improved and in time the volume of low grade material available for woodchip production could decline dramatically. Conversely a much greater proportion of timber will be available for high quality uses such as furniture and veneer."

This could dangerously mislead. Today, there seems to be no market calling out for beech in furniture and veneers that other timbers (perhaps innovative exotic hardwoods) could not satisfy. This despite the repeated encouraging words from some in favour of small industries from beech.

Forest's Chief Glory

By the Company statement, management would eliminate "over mature" (that word again!) old trees which are the forest's chief glory today. Sustained management under Government rules might allow the clearfelling of selected bits, so long as new forests were adjudged capable of growing up. Not much would remain of the old forest profile. New adolescent production forests would be there



instead.

Even at such a level, matching mature felling by new growth, the crunch question is not could sustained yield management be done, but would it? Who would ensure it continued over the years needed to bring back a forest, when none of us today will be any longer around?

What sort of scientific consensus would be sought for the new rules? What bureaucracy would be needed to monitor it? The industry's own people? Or who else would pay for it? And would every sustained yield log reach the wharf embossed with a certificate of bona