
Innovative plantation initiative in Aotearoa-New Zealand

The new Government of Aotearoa -a coalition supported by the Greens- has banned the cutting of indigenous beech trees (and soon probably Rimu and other species), because of the enormous pressure on the country's remaining areas of natural forest, which include temperate rainforest and temperate dryforest.

As a result, the downstream beneficiaries of forestry (the mills and processors) took the Government to Court over the breach of existing contracts which if honoured would have seriously endangered the sustainability of beech forests. Luckily they lost in Court, but the action set off a huge national fight over the future of the forestry industry, which is one of New Zealand's largest employers and most powerful industries.

Local Indigenous Peoples Organizations and NGOs' response to the pressure was to point out that the country still has one of the largest radiate pine plantation areas and industries in the world, but that other countries are climbing on the pine bandwagon, and that within 30 or 40 years the value of pine as a timber species is going to drop dramatically as competition lowers prices. IPOs and NGOs are currently proposing that every time an area of pine is cut, a percentage of it be replanted with indigenous species, in order to gradually build up an equivalent of a biological corridor.

They are also proposing that the "charismatic barrier" of these areas at the least include some non timber, but nectar and berry producing species, because there are more endangered native bird species in Aotearoa than in any other country. The charismatic barrier is the roadside part of plantations which are rarely cut so that the public is not visually confronted with the reality of large deforested areas. Because it manages to leave an illusion that cutting is not occurring it is called the charismatic barrier.

This planting of indigenous species in plantations replacing pine and/or in areas of non productive farmland means that the country would be building up stock of indigenous tree species, so that in fifty or sixty years, when the pressure is really on to harvest indigenous species -as pine has become very cheap- the country would have plantations of indigenous trees that could be cut instead of endangering natural forests.

The above scheme appears to be viable and beneficial because:

- It would have fairly strong Chiefs' support, because indigenous trees are seen as Taonga (treasures) by the Maori elders
- It foresees pressures on forests before they arise and provides alternatives for employment
- The planting program itself is labour intensive and as such would be supported by Government in areas of high unemployment
- Using the charismatic barrier as an area to include berry producing and nectar trees (indigenous)

would provide an area for native birds that is currently non-existent in most of the country

- Most of all, it relieves pressure for the cutting of forests as an employment source
- It is economically feasible

The above ideas are currently being strongly promoted by a large part of the IPO/NGO community, with the aim of simultaneously promoting forest conservation and employment generation in a country where many try -in their own interest- to picture conservation and jobs as being antagonistic to each other. Thus -contrary to what industry always tries to prove- IPOs and NGOs are proving to be the truly reasonable and responsible actors, trying to make environmental conservation and quality of life compatible.

By: Sandy Gauntlett,