

Max Jacobs Oration

Practicing forestry today: fashions, new ideas and old values

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Introduction

By way of introduction I would like to take a few moments to remind us all of the person in whose honour this oration is to be given. Tomorrow, October 9 1999, will mark 20 years since Max Jacobs died. In a professional forestry career spanning 44 years for the Australian Government he enthused politicians on the merits of forestry, taught and mentored countless young professionals, communicated nationally and internationally the benefits of forests and contributed a stream of new ideas to the profession. As Athol Meyer in his text *The Foresters* (1985) notes:

Max Jacobs was the nice guy of Australian forestry in the mid years of the 20th century ... he is remembered with affection and respect by those he taught and those he worked with.

It is an honour to accept the invitation of the Institute of Foresters of Australia to present this Oration.

Forestry as an idea

Forestry is an idea, a concept resulting from human thought and experience; it has no other reality. A tree, a forest, a river, a lake describe a reality; these are physical objects that exist and are likely to persist for a very long time. Forestry as an idea can only survive if it is relevant and meets community aspirations. It is salutary for those of us who practise forestry to remind ourselves of this frail hold that forestry has in the real world.

Practising forestry today requires us to be more mindful of relevance to the community than at any other time in the recent past. Why do I say this? Isn't this a little dramatic given the tortuous path of forestry and forest policy in this country over the past 100 years? I say this because the community is changing rapidly around us. In less than five years, dot com has become more important in shaping ideas and business than the telephone, radio and television combined. Ideas in our community are shaped by information. Real time ideas, with poignant images on the world wide web, are no longer restricted to state or national boundaries. The world sees, the world hears, the world judges and this all happens in fractions of a second. There is often little time for analysis. News is entertainment and our views are formed by personalities beamed around the world. In the information age, old certainties are replaced overnight. Capital is attracted to areas of high return. Primary production and manufacturing are seen as low return and a little old hat. Forestry is in danger of being caught in this relevance trap.

I can imagine that you are worried about how all this is important to the theme of practising forestry today. It is

significant because unless we understand the changes in our communities and respond creatively, forestry will be like the dinosaurs of the Jurassic period. Dinosaurs were technically very efficient but became extinct as the environment changed dramatically around them. Evolution, even rapid adaptation, was not a survival option for the dinosaur. The surrounding environment changed too rapidly – the dinosaur couldn't and it is now an interesting fossil.

In addressing the challenges of practising forestry today, I want to explore the topic at two different levels: the personal level – the challenges for the individual practising forestry today, and the social level – the challenges for greater relevance of forestry in the community.

Personal level

At a personal level the key issues seem to be ones of courage, integrity and innovation. You could argue that many human endeavours require these attributes and undoubtedly many professions require a fair mix of these personal traits. My argument is that whatever the technical skills required for success as a forester today, these three particular personal attributes are vital for success.

Critics will undoubtedly label this approach as a thoroughly anthropocentric view. I acknowledge that a more biocentric perspective is fashionable but I make no apology for my abiding interest in human welfare. I believe the biocentric position is a trap if we are genuinely interested in delivering science-based forestry and an improved human condition.

Let me deal briefly in turn with each of the attributes.

Why is courage so important? It is clearly not fashionable in parts of Australian society to be labelled a forester. The critics and the competitors in the market place of ideas have portrayed foresters as the devil, the princes of darkness in the honourable battle to save the trees, the forests and the planet. Particularly in egalitarian Australia, the forester is presented as the powerful corporate – like the bankers, not to be trusted, out of touch with the needs of the community. Appealing to this distinction between foresters as they see themselves – caring, fostering sustainable use for community benefit and foresters as the tree butchers motivated by greed, has been influential in shaping community ideas about forestry. The increasing corporatisation of forestry agencies, while good commercially provides easy scope for the one-line critics who publicly equate EBIT (earnings before interest and tax) with greed, performance standards with unbridled power and dividends with payments from the devil.

In this operating environment, it takes a fair measure of courage to practise forestry and to practise it publicly. In many places foresters appear to be in retreat, a little defeated by popular AFL football coaches or celebrity fashion designers who are the latest experts on sustainable forestry. I recall a recent letter to me from a critic suggesting: 'Evan, you must have a stomach of iron to persist with your rotten policies.' All this is tough and sometimes clever marketing by competitors and it overlooks the substance of forest science. It overlooks the reality that most foresters are focused on improving human welfare.

All of this comment is not to suggest that practising forestry today is a martyr's trip, but it is pertinent to the practice of forestry that, at a personal level, if you're convinced on the science you must have the courage to persevere. We must have the courage to take a public stand. We must regularly display the courage of our convictions. A visit to well managed regrowth forests on a sunny day is a good antidote if your courage is waning.

The second attribute essential for practising forestry today is integrity. For me, this means high standards of probity and a moral soundness about the approach being taken. The practice of forestry profoundly influences the lives of men and women in our community. The quality of community life, the employment and the outputs from forestry activity have long-lasting social effects. A strong personal sense of integrity in forestry is absolutely vital. This has been an important attribute for foresters since it was so eloquently documented by Gifford Pinchot in his visionary writings in *Breaking New Ground* in the 1940s:

The earth, I repeat, belongs of right to all its people, and not to a minority ... the public good must come first. The rightful use and purpose of our natural resources is to make all the people strong and well, able and wise, well taught, well fed, well clothed, well housed, full of knowledge and initiative, with equal opportunity for all and special privilege for none.

Finally, at the personal level, a capacity for innovation is vital. Ideas keep forestry fresh, lively and an inspiring vocation from which to contribute towards improved community welfare. Innovation is all about developing new ideas and bringing changes that are relevant to community needs. Finding new solutions and never tiring from the cries of: what if we did it this way or, why don't we try this approach? Perhaps this quality seems to you to be a self-evident attribute. Why should I make such a point to a group of people who obviously think a lot about the world around them? I can say from the experience of almost ten years in my current role that pursuing new ideas sounds rational but is extremely difficult to fulfil in practice. The day to day of working life unconsciously leads us to seek safe patterns of behaviour, to adopt formulae with predictable, anticipated outcomes. We tend to reward consistency and be risk averse. This doesn't encourage ideas and innovation.

It is also difficult to avoid the complacency or the defensiveness that naturally surfaces when one is under attack. Learning to take the questions, the complaints or criticism as a gift that can be analysed in order to search for new ideas is the thought I'd like you to explore. Ideas keep us alive and have the potential to keep forestry relevant. Investing in thinking, researching and trialing new ideas is an attribute we must encourage. A capacity for innovation will be essential for foresters at a personal level as we explore the opportunities for improving human welfare in the new millennium.

In our information society, ideas are creating the new wealth and the new employment. Young people are particularly successful

in this information age. Why? It is because they are interested in ideas, they ask why and they ask why not? We need to foster forestry work environments that bubble with ideas and risk taking. Ideas are an undervalued attribute in professional life today. It is a personal attribute that I believe is essential for maintaining relevance in the practice of forestry.

Social level

The social level of forestry has not received as much attention as it deserves. We attend endlessly to replicated experiments on nutrition, tree physiology and conservation of biodiversity. All of these are worthy topics themselves and potentially contribute to human welfare. My plea is for some additional time, energy and research into the social dimensions of practising forestry today.

It is a fascinating insight into how we've lost touch with social and human values to consider just one of the key implementation aspects of the National Forest Policy in Australia. Specifically, the National Forest Policy calls for Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) to provide certainty for land use allocation and sustainable forest management. The topic of RFAs has been well canvassed with papers presented at this 18th Biennial IFA Conference. The key test for success of an RFA outcome has been the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System (CARRs). There have been few public statements issued by governments on RFA outcomes that haven't proudly heralded their CARR result as the key achievement.

So much national time and energy went into debating and resolving the quantitative guidelines to assess the adequacy of CARRs: A national political debate took place involving the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on the question of whose political party in government would support the biggest CARRs; 10% or 15% of pre-European distribution of each forest type in secure conservation reserves. As you know, the 15% camp won the debate in the end and a national bipartisan position was adopted momentarily.

Leaving aside the merits of the CARR percentages it was illuminating to see the response to trying to convince the political and bureaucratic environments to adopt equally quantitative measures for social assessments. I called these Regional Employment and Production goals (REAP) and argued publicly for their adoption (Rolley 1996). I could not get national support for quantitative goals for human welfare – 'too difficult', 'too hard to measure', 'what if we miss the targets?' While RFAs certainly considered social and economic influences, the absence of quantitative REAP goals has always concerned me—they were never seriously debated or considered to be a worthy pursuit.

This criticism is not to cry over spilt milk for the RFAs that have now been agreed. The RFA verdicts are out in many regions of Australia. In Tasmania, having lost the quantitative REAP debate, we argued that the conservation reserve system was important *and* that the CARR must be sized against what the community could afford. At the time, with 12% unemployment in Tasmania, this seemed rational. Any loss of sustainable and productive resource flows from forests had to be made up by investment in forest silviculture designed to maintain or expand supply levels. In an indirect way, we achieved qualitative REAP objectives. It would have been an improvement to see quantitative REAP goals firmly assessed in each RFA.

The community is crying out for the political process at both State and Federal level to stop forgetting about human values. One million Australian voters in the last Federal election disconnected for the first time from the major political parties.

The disaffected registered a vote in protest at governments being out of touch with rural and regional Australia. The recent Victorian State election (September 1999) confirms the distrust, frustration and concern for deteriorating human welfare outside the major capital cities. Concern for human welfare has been lost by some of our current political aspirants in the buzz of city lights, stock exchange floats and improving Moody's credit ratings. Some commentators have referred to the emergence of two Australias: an affluent, confident and growing community in the major capital cities and an aging, unemployed, confused and frustrated regional and country Australia. This is a generalisation, but it has an important element of truth. Foresters would do well to ponder the potential this situation offers for new forestry approaches that reinvest and reconnect with regional Australia.

All of this change in the external environment is a reminder to foresters about the importance of relevance to communities at the social level. This will be vital for forestry in the days ahead.

Fashions, new ideas and old values

The sub-title of my address is 'fashions, new ideas and old values.' This is drawn from my developing views about the key things foresters should watch as we respond to changes at the community level.

Let me elaborate on these thoughts.

Fashion is one of the more worrying features of forestry today. Fashion sees foresters and the political process respond to the noisy and rhetorical with simple slogans and simple solutions. The 'all plantations strategy' as the optimum community outcome for wood production is the latest fashion statement.

There is no science to support the superior economic, environmental and social benefits of the 'all plantations' strategy. The plantation mantra rises like a numbing wave through media, industry advertising and from deep green political calls. There is no doubt that thoughtfully designed plantation strategies have an increasing role to play in modern wood supplies. However, a greater role for plantations should not be at an increased cost to society, rural communities and the environment by abandoning sustainable management of native forests for production of a range of goods and services.

A mixed strategy of increasing plantations, linked with intensive and extensively managed native forests, can provide good results in science for biodiversity conservation, good results for production objectives and a good cash flow to fund ongoing native forest management.

At the social level, new forestry ideas are required to help define new regional welfare solutions. Regional communities are suffering economically, infrastructure is fully depreciated and in need of capital renewal, unemployment is high and frustration with globalisation and the impact of the economic rationalist approach is widespread.

Integrated forestry projects that bring new investment in tree planting, reinvestment in existing native forests, new processing technologies and efficient transport infrastructure are needed. These projects need a specific regional dimension. Plantation expansion on its own is not enough. The jobs and welfare improvement will come from linking this expansion with modern regional processing centres. Centralised merchandising of logs and onsite production of new types of products is needed.

The idea that the principal market for new plantations is export woodchips isn't clever new thinking. The plantation expansion programme needs to be linked to clever ideas for new processing of engineered wood products, of biomass energy, chemical extraction and residue exports. A node of linked industries with best available environmental technology is the way forward. Scale and quality for world competitive processing will create exciting new jobs in the regions: jobs in engineering, information technologies, service suppliers etc. These processing investments will complement the jobs in silviculture, planning, harvesting and transport.

New ideas for production of solid wood products are needed to maximise value recovery and minimise waste. It seems crazy that in 1999 we still accept 35% – 38% recovery of finished products from round log volume. This sort of recovery in a production process that takes 80 to 100 years wouldn't put a man or woman on the moon. Yet it is this sort of thinking that persists in the forest processing sector. New ideas to link private capital and public assets to create a profitable basis for risk sharing and investment are needed. New ways of linking local government and State government in partnerships to drive these regional changes are required.

Partnership ideas with local government for local community benefit will be vital over the next five years. While RFAs sort out the national and State government interaction we have a huge gap in forestry with local government. We have seen local governments banning use of timber from certain producers, difficulties with plantation projects, roading and water quality concerns. Some new thinking is needed immediately in this area.

New ways to think about forest recreation and in-forest visitor infrastructure are needed. New ideas for optimising water yield and water quality from forested catchments are required. New ways to achieve scale and profitability for farm forestry and address land degradation are important. These are just some of the challenges that need intellectual effort to bring forestry back solidly into the relevance circle of the political process.

The maintenance of 'old values' should hardly require a treatise. Foresters for generations have held sustainability values as pillars in resource use debates. The fundamental importance of maintaining forest biodiversity and employment and wealth creation for enhanced human welfare must not be overlooked. The commitment of generations of foresters to long-term sustainability is a cornerstone of a science-based approach to forestry. Sustainability definitions change. We need to understand these and react thoughtfully to new information. We need sustainability strategies that respond to market demands and not the other way around.

Multi-use strategies so disparaged in the era of privatisation need to be thoughtfully revisited. Multi-use strategies can deliver optimum community benefits. We now have the tools to improve spatial planning, the sophistication in landscape management methods and a growth in community interest in a range of non-wood forest values. Multi-use strategies are not discredited – they are alive and well. More than 400 000 people visited State forests in Tasmania last year. Selected visitor sites in State forests experienced 5%-7% per annum growth in numbers. Some 2.4 million tonnes of wood were harvested supporting a \$1.2 billion Tasmanian forests and wood products sector. Forested catchments provided the principal water supplies for 75%-80% of the population. Multiple use can work quite well. Multi-use strategies need review, renewal and some

new ideas about how to optimise the range of benefits, how to more precisely measure outputs and how to communicate more effectively the benefits of these outputs to the community.

Communication

Communication seems an important point to both begin and end a discussion on practising forestry today. How many times in your life as a forester have you had the experience of the day in the bush with an interested, concerned citizen? How often, winding your way back home down a dusty track late in the afternoon has the conversation ended something like this – ‘well, I didn’t realise how much thought and planning goes into forestry – why don’t we ever hear or see the regrowth story, the range of benefits from well managed forests?’ How often do we have to repeat this experience before we start to act on it?

In twenty-five years, this has been one of the constants of my experience with the community on forestry issues. I believe this tells us a lot about the lack of weight we give to communication about forestry. Look, I can hear you say – this is for politicians, the media isn’t friendly, we don’t stand a chance. We’ve done the RFA, let’s get on with the business of forestry. These are the responses of a forestry idea that has lost relevance and will be overtaken in the information society.

Those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. Communicating effectively and directly can swing the tide of public opinion quite profoundly. My experience of the heady days of Hawke and Richardson in 1988 bears this out.

The independent Helsham Commission of Inquiry appointed by Senator Graham Richardson and the Federal government handed down its decision on what parts of an area of 283 000 ha of Tasmania qualified for World Heritage listing. The Helsham Commission recommended 8% of the area. This was not the answer Federal Environment Minister Richardson wanted. This answer would not help swing the marginal voters throughout Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. What was his strategy? He records it very well in his memoir *Whatever it Takes* (1994):

The first thing I did was let the environment movement know that this was a battle I would not or could not fight alone: I encouraged them to make a deafening roar about the decision.

Erratum:

A number of words were omitted (at the final print stage) from the paper by M.J. Steinbauer in Volume 64 (1). The sentence starting at the bottom of page 35 (Discussion) should read-

In comparison, studies with autumn gum moth IV to V instar larvae, which consume whole leaves, should quote values for SLW determined using a hole-punch of large diameter or possibly even whole leaf estimates.

The words in bold were omitted.

The deafening roar was made, the tide was turned and the forestry community was sidelined. Contrast this to 1995 when the Keating Government was skipping about on export licences. The public rallies and the Canberra Parliament House blockade reminded politicians that enough was enough.

If we all put just 10% of our energy, intellect and passions into communicating the benefits of forestry for society we could make a difference. The world wide web offers us a powerful medium but we’ll need innovation to communicate effectively. With the information technologies available today, we have the capacity to take millions for a forest experience. We can let them roam the forest on a computer screen in the safety of their homes. We can encourage them to join programmes that connect them with forests and build powerful links between the city and the bush. The Landcare programme has been a model of success in this regard.

Closing

In closing, let me return to where I began. Forestry is an idea. It is an idea connecting people to forests. The idea will be sustained if it is passionately pursued with science and good commonsense side by side. To work with people to better understand forests, to work to uncover new ways to improve human welfare, is to pursue a fortunate life.

Never tire from the challenges, think creatively and foster new ideas. Society will judge you kindly if you do.

Reference

- Meyer, A. (1985) *The Foresters*. Institute of Foresters of Australia, Hobart. 72 p.
- Pinchot, G. (1942) *Breaking New Ground*. Harcourt Brace, New York.. 522 p.
- Rolley, E.R. (1996) *Issues and Problems in Forestry*, 4th Annual Country Sawmillers Conference, Launceston October 1996.
- Richardson, G. (1994) *Whatever it Takes*. Bantam, Sydney. 382 p.