

Mammon on the Mamaku

When the Governor-General, Sir Arthur Porritt, opened the new Forest Research Institute wing at Rotorua last month, he stressed his special regard for the native bush that still plays a great part in developing the traditions of New Zealanders. The bush our pioneers left us is part of our New Zealand way of life, as much as rugby or beer. But the remaining bush areas are destined for further reduction.

Foresters have largely abandoned early hopes of sustained yield from native forest because of the slow growth of the trees, and now anticipate only a single crop. The success of *Pinus radiata* forestry and its potential for exploiting world markets led the National Development Conference to approve targets for expansion involving 57,000 acres of planting each year, a figure some would like raised to 70,000. While considerable areas of scrub, bracken, tussock or marginal eroding farm lands will be planted, much cut-over native bush will also be converted to pine forest. Thus, as the century draws to its end, many of the bush lands we thought of as permanent will become tree-farms for exotics. Pressure for such development is strongest near the existing milling centres of the central North Island. Unfortunately these are also the areas of the North Island where wild-life is most worth saving.

State forests of the Mamaku Plateau, flanking the highway to Rotorua from the north, have produced rimu and other timber over the years but have remained the most accessible place in the North Island to see native birds – robin, tit, rifleman, whitehead, tui, bellbird, pigeon, parakeet, kaka – and the rare kokako if one is lucky. Now screened from the highway by a pathetic hedge of tawa bush – too narrow for permanence and inadequate as bird habitat – 37,000 acres of native forest are destined for conversion. In preparing ground for pine planting, native growth must be completely removed by defoliant spray, chainsaw, bulldozer and fire. In the process, thousands of native birds will die unseen as surely as if shot, and only a few kinds are likely to re-colonise the new forests. In the past 50 years, much public money was spent on ranging and bird protection: was it justified? Someone slipped in failing to reserve adequate roadside areas for the growing number of naturalists who buy lavish bird books and make wild-life TV programs so popular.

For many state forests in other districts, it seems, conversion to pines will also be the policy, after extraction of podocarp timber or when a single crop of native beech has been harvested for woodchips or pulpwood. Thus, Big Bush in Nelson, the Catlins-Maclennan bush of Otago, the Longwood Range of Southland and other native forests of our lifetimes may become pine-forests for our grandchildren. We have lived at the best time, with modern medicine and transport, able to enjoy New Zealand before it loses the flavour we love. The world, man's environment, is being altered by human manipulation, and to form balanced judgements about our future environment we must cease being technologists and economists and become philosophers, not afraid to look at the total picture.

Such a total picture must include not only production forests but also reserves

of the environments special to New Zealand – for recreation, for scenery, and for science. This of course has been freely recognised by New Zealand forestry planners who have recommended ‘that all forests be managed according to multiple-use principles, that is, including wood production, soil and water conservation, recreation and/or scenery preservation’. But under pressure from a booming forest industry, considerable effort is needed to save adequate communities of plants and animals in reserves large enough to be viable and accessible for recreation.

The forest service and its Minister, as guardians of our forests – yours and mine and not just the timber trade’s – deserve all the support we can give them to save native bush as reserves in the face of pressure from the land-hungry industry. The best support would be active local interest, expressed by all lovers of the outdoors – trampers, naturalists, hunters, anglers and scenery preservationists. To select areas for reservation, these many interests, both amateur and professional, should collaborate with the Nature Conservation Council and other Government agencies. The prosperous timber industry can afford to accept some limitations on its ambitions and seems anxious to establish a conservation image, to judge from the wild-life photos published in company reports.

If we fail, posterity will be justified in accusing us of national greed, of sacrificing the quality of *their* lives for *our* dividends and Gross National Product.

—Charles A. Fleming

Dr Fleming, FRS, a Wellington scientist, is immediate Past President of the Royal Society of New Zealand.