

## From Monterey to Middle Earth by Norm Benson

New Zealand is at the end of the map. It looks isolated. Australia, its closest neighbor, is almost 700 miles away across the Tasman Sea. Until the Maori found it, 1200 years ago, only migratory birds knew of New Zealand. It is still isolated. Yet, now all it takes is round-trip airfare and a passport. To me, a California Registered Professional Forester, it's heaven with a lower case "H."

When you arrive, New Zealand is both alien and familiar. It is like California in many ways. The similarities in geography, climate, and history are remarkable. It is about the same size as California and has a similar climate. Like California, New Zealand is part of the 'ring of fire' of the Pacific Rim and has frequent earthquakes. The first night I was there in Wellington, I experienced a 5.3 magnitude earthquake. They share similar histories. Like California, there were people on the land before Europeans arrived. Everyone is an immigrant or a descendent of one. They come from Polynesia, the United Kingdom and its former British colonies, and elsewhere. The people radiate vibrancy. They have an independent 'can do' streak. New Zealand even had a gold rush complete with placer mining.



Similarities abound in this country Peter Jackson has made famous

Yet, they diverge in surprising ways. While the land area is near in size to California's, the population size is closer to Los Angeles. Sheep outnumber people by ten to one. The largest city, Auckland, has one-tenth the population of LA. Another big difference for me, an LA kid familiar with LA freeways - they drive on the wrong side of the road. Unlike urban Californians, Kiwis, that's what New Zealanders call themselves, are intimate with their land. Their livelihoods come from it. For example, the Kiwis still harvest trees. Wood is their number three export after meat and dairy. While California imports 75% of its wood, New Zealand produces enough wood to take care of its own needs and even exports the surplus. Mind you, they don't cut native trees. They cut California trees: California's Monterey pine to be precise.

Of course, that was why I was there. I had the unique opportunity to learn this and other forest facts with others of my kind. I heard about a New Zealand tour for foresters by foresters and immediately decided to go. We were nine intrepid explorers, six men and three

women, ranging in age from recently hired to long retired. What I read intrigued me: “Enjoy grand landscapes and the fine hospitality and unique culture of the Kiwis (and maybe even discover a Hobbit or two) while learning about forest ecology, biodiversity, conservation policy, the forest economy, and intensive plantation management in this fascinating country.” What more could a California Registered Professional Forester dude ask for? I’d never seen a hobbit.

New Zealand is seeing an influx of tourists because of Peter Jackson filming the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the country. There is "*The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook*" by Ian Brodie to help tourists locate filming locations for the movie. It is a cottage industry.

Hobbits and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien notwithstanding, intensive forestry with California trees fascinates me. Don’t get me wrong; I loved reading *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I just wanted to see the forests to find out why California companies like Soper-Wheeler were moving there. New Zealand and Australia as well, had planted radiata pine (Monterrey pine’s scientific name is *Pinus radiata*) in a big way. They were growing trees and harvesting them on short rotation schedules. They cut trees there that would qualify in California as “Heritage” tree size and they were doing it in only 25 years. In fact, one-acre of Monterrey pine in New Zealand produces almost ten times more wood than our most productive natural forest. I’ll write more about this later.



Tom Gamin contemplates a 100 year old coast redwood in Rotorua. Soper-Wheeler hopes to grow trees like this in less than 30 years.

This use of what to them is an exotic species, at first glance, may appear novel. It is not to the Kiwis. It’s a spirit that pervades the entire nation. Their love for radiata pine started around the mid 19th century. At that time, wool was a high-end commodity: ‘a pound for a pound.’ They cleared the native forests, exported the wood and wool and converted the land to pasture for sheep. The land clearing alarmed some; the loss of native forest alarmed others.

In 1905, their annual cut peaked and began to decline. A 1913 Royal Commission sounded the alarm: NZ needed more wood than remaining native forests could provide. The commission recommended an aggressive program of intensive forest plantations. Yet, the Kiwis thought native tree species would be too slow growing to provide for their domestic wood needs. So they planted many different types of trees to replace the bush that they had cleared: ponderosa pine, black pine, larch, coast redwood, Douglas-fir, and Monterrey pine to name a few. They succeeded. New Zealand saved ten acres of native forest for every one-acre planted. Then in the 1960’s, the Kiwis really got serious.

The country not only became self-sufficient, but it produces more wood than it needs. Today, forestry exports contribute over \$1.8 billion (US) to the New Zealand economy. This is over 10% of their export income and represents roughly 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP). There are over four million acres of tree planta-

tions. Radiata pine is the primary species because it grows fast and straight there. Jeff Tombleson, of New Zealand's Forest Research Centre, calls radiata pine 'New Zealand mahogany.' He says, "to paraphrase Henry Ford, we think any tree is fine as long as it's radiata pine."

They sell this wood abroad primarily. Their economy relies on exports so they are very customer oriented. "The customer is always right," Tombleson said frequently. So when Home Depot first issued its Wood Purchasing Policy in 1999. Home Depot pledged to give preference to wood that came from forests managed responsibly and to eliminate wood purchases from endangered regions of the world by the end of 2002. The Kiwis took notice.

If they wanted to stay in the world market as a 'green producer' for Home Depot and others, they needed to prove they were doing things right. They needed to meet the certification standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). FSC began in 1993. It is an independent, not for profit, non-governmental organization based in Germany. It promotes environmentally appropriate management of the world's forests that is also socially beneficial and economically viable. It sets standards and accredits companies and organizations practicing responsible forestry.



Jeff Tombleson shows off the growth of a twelve year radiata pine

The Kiwis are working with FSC to enhance the value of their exports. They have improved the crops both mechanically and genetically. They prune the trees for clear, knot-free timber, and plant the radiata pine from rooted cuttings rather than seedlings because the results are better. The cuttings are from well-formed trees selected over many years. They ship the wood all over the globe--even to California.

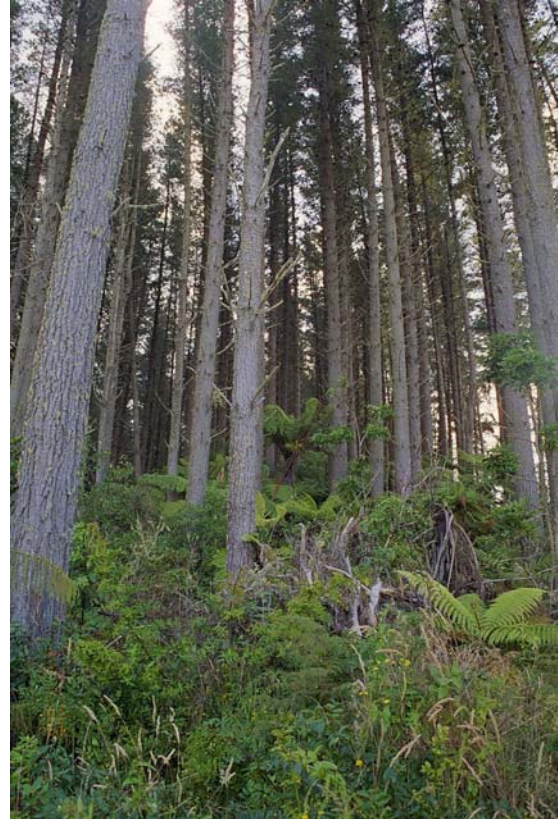
California, and the United States, may have something to learn from New Zealand. Currently California could grow and produce all the wood it needs. Many point to the native forests to meet the demand. There is enough timber now in our forests to provide what the state needs, and we could grow it in a sustainable way. Yet these same areas are also valued for old-growth and endangered-species habitat, recreation, or other values.

To protect these values, there are also those who promote replacing wood with other products such as plastics or hemp. Both of these options have negative costs. Plastics come from nonrenewable sources from unstable areas: either politically (as in Iraq) or environmentally (as in the Artic National Wildlife Refuge). Hemp, straw (for straw bale building), and other annual crops are monocultures. Monocultures require frequent applications of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to keep down pests and stimulate growth. Those who argue that tree plantations are monocultures only need to listen to the animal life and see the undergrowth to recognize the difference.

We Americans could replicate what the Kiwis have, that is, grow more wood on fewer acres. Forest geneticist and UC Berkeley Professor William Libby, says, and other experts agree, substantial increases of 40% in productivity are easily obtainable in American forests. The result is better for all, not just Americans. In a paper written by Libby and Donna Dekker-Robertson they say "If Americans can more often 'think globally' rather than just 'acting

locally, ' a better sample of forest ecosystems everywhere may be maintained for generations to come.'"

I will return to New Zealand. It is a place of beauty. There is a laid back attitude coupled with an undercurrent of optimism. There are no obstacles that can't be overcome. David Young the author of *Our Islands, Our Selves - A History of Conservation in New Zealand*, sums it up this way, "we think we can; and therefore we do." That optimism is infectious. Next time I'll see a Hobbit.



You only need to but look at a radiata pine plantation to see that it has more diversity than a corn field.