

Forestry is a dark word

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There's been so much ill-informed talk about planting trees to save the world that maybe it's time to look at what we mean when we use the words 'forest' and 'forestry', and consider their chequered and sometimes dark history.

Forestry as it is currently defined in this country encompasses the management and tending of forests as well as an understanding of forest ecology and environment, based on centuries of research and experience. In the farming context forestry can also apply to trees, either indigenous or introduced, planted for shelter or privacy.

However, when the adjective 'indigenous' is tacked to it forestry becomes either a vulgar or fashionable word for many New Zealanders and, given New Zealand's history of flattening thousands of hectares of natural forest to satisfy the desire of successive governments to provide cheap timber for housing and the present Parliament's obsession with supposed if often ignorant environmental correctness, this is hardly surprising.

Consider these aspects. The words 'foreigner', 'forest', and 'forestry' have a dark side dating from long before they entered the English language a millennium ago. Together, they comprise one of those curious and illogical usages that help to make English baffling to foreigners.

Nothing surprising here; 'forestry' and 'foreigners' have a common ancestor unrelated to plants. Both are from the Latin root, *foris*, meaning 'out of Rome', i.e., beyond the law.

'Forest' brought the outlaw association into the English language from northern France, via the Norman conquest, after the fall of the Roman empire, and in Medieval times referred to areas or regions where normal laws did not apply. Trees did not necessarily grow there.

Eleventh-century English kings enjoyed 'forestal' rights to keep and hunt deer on any land, regardless of its ownership. A forest was a place, wooded or otherwise, where the king's deer grazed. The first foresters were gamekeepers who managed deer, not trees, and the first outlaws were the deer poachers they pursued. Robin Hood and his merry men, if they ever existed, were probably among the latter.

In the 12th century, 'forest' was an accepted legal term for a tract of land within which Forest Law applied and was administered by special forest courts. Many 'forests' included private farmland, private woodland, even towns and villages. If the king's

deer strayed beyond their boundaries, forest law travelled with them. Forestal rights belonged to the king and entitled him to keep and slaughter deer on any land, employ forest officials, and appoint forest courts, which had the right to impose penalties ranging from fines, imprisonment, or land confiscation, to the cruel and unusual, including confiscating the testicles of offenders. The king retained the right to pocket any fines imposed on transgressors. I have no information on the fate of other bits or body parts.

Similar rights were granted by the king to selected noblemen, but their domains were usually referred to as 'chases', not forests.

Forest law ended after the signing of the *Magna Carta* on 15th June 1215 and the primary meaning of 'forest' metamorphosed from land to trees somewhere between the 13th and 16th centuries, by which time privately owned woodlots or woodlands where deer grazed had become known as parks.

The word 'park' also has a chequered history. Derived from the Anglo-Saxon *pearroc*, meaning a piece of land enclosed by a fence, it has successively meant a place for keeping deer, the outer, informal part of the grounds attached to the house of a gentleman (i.e., a landowner who employed staff to manage his estate), and (the current meaning) a public place for recreation, sport, or horticulture.

While no deer farmers today would describe themselves as foresters, many deer farms have park in their names, although the owners may not know the real reason why it's there.

If this means that the words 'forest', 'forester', and 'park' are going to complete a full circle, the time may be right to look further back for a name for forests, to Roman times, when a natural forest was known as a *silva* (the source of the word 'silviculture') and what we would now call a plantation was an *arbustum* from which, presumably, the rip, slash, and bust school of forest management evolved. Or we could stick to Anglo-Saxon and revive 'wildwoods', the

charming word that was used for naturally wooded areas when forests were still places for deer, not trees.



Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, England.
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This article is an extract from the text of a manuscript completed by Derrick Rooney. He describes this unpublished book as a diverse and, he hopes, interesting chat about trees for various purposes, including farms, orchards, lifestyle blocks and gardens.

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