# Lessons Not Learned at University #10

## Gaining acceptance

*The Consultant* often carried out resource management work. It was well accepted where the outputs were being used by knowledgeable people. However, he quickly learnt that the essence of consultancy work is to understand what really matters to the decision maker, rather than the technical purity of the work. Here are two examples.

**The GIS system.** Back in the early days of Geographic Information Systems *The Consultant* was invited to attend the launch of a new GIS computer platform by a major computer hardware and software supplier. They had input information for the whole of a particular shire; soils, topography, vegetation, current land use, average rainfall and so on. The glitzy demonstration showed how they could determine where particular land types lay and how they could determine the suitability of any area for any land use. It was all simply a matter of entering all the data and the right decision criteria. Their data base was a bit limited but it was still a very impressive demonstration.

They were asked whether they could map out all the area suitable for planting radiata pine. This particular question had been anticipated, and they proceeded to answer it with considerable glee. They set the decision rules to exclude areas of unsuitable topography, soil types, soil depths and so on and then proudly showed the map on the big screen.

The local Mayor and staff were initially very impressed at the speed with which the company had achieved the answer to their question.

Then their comments turned to mirth as someone in the audience with local knowledge pointed out that a very large freshwater lake was portrayed as suitable for radiata pine. The demonstration was as good as over, it had failed miserably.

One more line in the decision rules saying that a water body is not suitable for planting with radiata pine would have prevented the embarrassment, but it was too late. The cause of the computer company was lost, and it was some years before it recovered.

**The Burmese National Forest Inventory.** *The Burmese Counterpart* saved *The Consultant* from falling into this particular trap.

The Minister of Forests was visiting the project to review the National Forest Inventory in Burma. The project had presented some challenges, but had been turned around and was now a great success. A carefully stage managed Ministerial visit could now be risked. The presentation was put together by the staff and it emphasised the 11,000 inventory plots, each with 5 sub-plots, spread across the whole of the Burmese forest. It was an impressive inventory and the reports that were prepared were equally impressive. The information could be summarised by imperial or metric, by girth or diameter classes, and variable ones at that, and species could be aggregated in any way desired although generally Teak and Pyinkado were kept separate because these were the two major timber species. They could produce "maps" on the line printer showing simple plot attributes for each point on the ca 3000 m grid.

The reports were just what the Burmese Forest Department and Timber Corporation needed. *The Consultant* was happy but *The Burmese Counterpart*, who was also the Computer Centre Manager, knew it was not quite enough, so he meticulously planned for the visit by the two Directors General and their Minister.

After the staff had taken the dignitaries on a tour of the computer centre and had made their formal presentation it was time for questions. The Minister said that he was indeed very impressed and thanked the staff for their great work. However what he wanted to really know was where did a certain rare *Gmelina* species grow, and how much had been found on the Bago Yoma, the mountain spur between the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers? The *Senior Programmer* asked the Minister to outline exactly how he wanted the output presented and he arranged for this single species to be treated as a single group for reporting. He then prepared the simple line printer grid map showing where the species occurred and the number of trees recorded on each 1.05 ha plot. In fact the species occurred on only about 5 plots out of thousands but the information was duly provided. The *Senior Programmer* knew it would work because he had made exactly this computer run two days before, in anticipation of the Minister's question. *The Burmese Counterpart* knew that this rare species was important for making shuttle bobbins for weaving silk, and that this was very important to the Minister of Forests.

This effortless ability answer to a "question out of the blue" sealed the success of the whole NFI system and ensured it would be recognised as being very flexible and the great achievement it really was.

**Lesson:** It is all too easy for a great system or plan to be rendered useless because details that are considered by some to be irrelevant are ignored when they are actually quite important to the decision makers.


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