

## Charles Leslie Batcheler

23 September 1933 – 18 May 2018



Photo: D. Batcheler

Les Batcheler was one of those young men (and a few women in those days) picked by the New Zealand Forest Service to broaden their horizons with a dose of overseas academic training and then come back to New Zealand to make a difference. Les had a hard background as his parents were obliged by the great depression to eke out a living as rabbiters in the Waitaki River Catchment, but he had the good fortune to be sent to Waitaki Boys High School for his secondary education – a school that has produced many distinguished ecologists in its day. Les joined the New Zealand Forest Service in 1951 and after completing a BSc at Victoria University College, Wellington, was soon dispatched to Oxford University to complete an MA Hons. Forestry, which he did with a thesis on the trophic interactions between roe, red and fallow deer in a forest in Scotland (Batcheler 1960). As an aside, whatever revisionist conservationists now think about the old Forest Service it did put its money where its mouth was with its in-house ranger training programmes and provision of support for graduate and post-graduate opportunities for its staff – which died with the NZFS and was never really reinvigorated by its successor departments despite some attempts by directors such as DOC's John Holloway. It will be interesting to see if the current resurrection of a 'forest service' has any vision other than planting a billion trees. Some time after returning to New Zealand Les joined the Forest and Range Experiment Station at Rangiora under Jack Holloway, and then its successor agencies in environmental forestry.

The research agencies for which Les worked had an applied focus. This was reflected in the many papers Les published on deer, possums and the other *bête noires* of the day. Les was a fierce defender of what he thought was good science and good ecology. Not for him the modern nonsense that all views are equally valid and indeed it took considerable argument (in which he, if not always his peers, delighted) backed by evidence to make him change his ideas. Les participated in the early debates within government around the 'last deer and last rabbit' paradigms that were flavours of the time that were finally overthrown by reality. Echoes here of the current predator free visions for New Zealand. Les also provided the Society with a timely warning in his Presidential address published in the first volume of the NZ Journal of Ecology –

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that the science behind conservation and its bastard political offspring environmentalism are at best but a subset of ecology. An Ecological Society and its journal that mistakes the narrow visions of conservation for the broad church of ecology risks (as Les put it) becoming a hobby for philatelists and numismatics rather than a full postal service or banking industry. Les indeed provided an analysis of the papers published in the Proceedings of the NZ Ecological Society and lamented the narrowing of interest across the first 26 years of the Society. Well the society is the sum of its members' interests but those who have papers rejected in recent years because they had no 'conservation' focus or dealt with the ecology of productive systems might have some sympathy with Les's point.

Much of Les's work was around measuring how many animals/plants are present before and after management – a reflection of policy demands of the time to justify government's actions to manage pests. Les realised that estimates of density taken from counts or presence/absence on plots were biased unless the things being counted were distributed at random. His work on distance measurement systems to account for this bias led to many of his published papers. Les's ecological work encompassed projects around the causes of dieback in *Metrosideros*, on the policies around the use of 1080, and on the management of deer.

He was also the typical New Zealand tinkerer. Les worked in the large Forest Service – Ecology Division DSIR project in the alpine Cupola Basin in Nelson. The team had a 2-week on 2-week out field programme that left the met station records of precipitation a bit dodgy when it was snow rather than rain that fell. Les invented a contraption that caught, melted and measured the snow when the team was not present.

Les was President of the Society from 1976 until 1978 and was made a Life Member in 2004. His presidency was an important time in the Society's history as we moved from publishing the Proceedings, i.e. largely of papers presented at the annual conference, to a fully-fledged journal with papers accepted (and rejected) from the wider catchment of New Zealand ecology.

In his retirement, Les and his wife Dorothy were leading lights in the campaigns to clean up the Avon-Heathcote estuary; the Avon-Heathcote Estuary Ihutai Trust. They achieved wins by having the treated sewage removed from the estuary and piped out to sea and in ongoing projects to restore the health of the estuary. In part in recognition of this advocacy, Les was awarded the Member New Zealand Order of Merit in 2005 for his service to ecology and the community.

John Parkes

### Chronological list of Les Batcheler's publications

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- Batcheler CL 1983. The possum and rata-kamahi dieback in New Zealand: a review. *Pacific Science* 37: 415–426.
- Batcheler CL 1985. Note on measurement of woody plant diameter distribution. *New Zealand Journal of Ecology* 8: 129–133.
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- Batcheler CL, Challies CN 1988. Loss of compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate) from carbopol gel smeared on foliage to poison deer. *New Zealand Journal of Forestry Science* 18: 109–115.
- Batcheler CL 1989. Moa browsing and vegetation formations, with particular references to deciduous and poisonous plants. *New Zealand Journal of Ecology* 12: 57–65.
- Pekelharing CJ, Batcheler CL 1990. The effect of control of brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) on condition of a southern rata/kamahi (*Metrosideros umbellata/Weinmannia racemosa*) forest canopy in Westland, New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Ecology* 13: 73–82.
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