

THE time TO ACT is now

By David Butcher

> Vital steps need to be taken to help resolve the long-running conflict over Australia's forest resources <





The causes of the conflict surrounding forest management in Australia have been widely debated. But it would seem that they can be distilled down to some basic issues:

> Most Australians would see their future forests as a vibrant complex of all naturally occurring types, certainly greater in area than is the case now, but managed in a way that will sustain their values for generations to come.

Protected areas will be the conservation and biodiversity anchor, with native forests outside of those protected areas having their values maintained through a robust system of sustainable management. Australia's timber industry will continue to rely on native forests for high-quality timber products, while having its full range of activities underwritten by extensive plantations that have been established on lands previously cleared for agricultural purposes.

The reality is that Australian forests and their management remain a vexed issue, with past practices having caused considerable concern in the wider community. Conflict has been a major part of forest policy development, with polarised groups at the extremes of the debate delaying the production of sound, well-reasoned and sustainable forest management outcomes. That said, there have been some dramatic changes in attitudes and some major advances in natural management agreements, especially in the past decade.

The highly innovative Regional Forest Agreements (RFA) offered great promise for the future, but shortcomings in some areas of implementation and resource assessment meant that their acceptance across the Australian community was patchy.

Biography

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- Forests are not just about timber production. Their value also lies in non-timber forest products, biodiversity, the wider ecosystem (in terms of water and air quality and quantity), land stability, aesthetics and heritage. Regulatory authorities and industry have often ignored such issues in the past and have defended the right to exploit forests on the basis of timber production alone.
- The conversion of native forests to other forms of land use, such as agriculture and plantation establishment, has created debate. This form of land clearing is not highly regarded by society today.
- Modern forms of industrial-scale forestry, especially those that involve large tracts of clear-felling, scar the landscape in a way that produces graphic and negative images.
- The current economics of forestry drives much of the production into low-value bulk commodities that, again, produce visual images that send unfortunate messages to the wider community.
- The Australian community has not been positively engaged in the debate on forests and their future. Instead, we have seen some unfortunate decisions based on a narrow view of current forestry practices that have continued to polarise the community.
- Government policy and regulation differ widely across the nation but are generally seen to be 'too little, too late'. They are often depicted as favouring one side or the other, further muddying the debate. Significant attempts to overcome these problems have not yielded the results promised. The Australian Forest Standard is one of the most recent attempts by government to present the industry as well-managed and transparent. The problem it faces is that while many of its standards match those recognised internationally as best-practice, certain commercial and community issues could not be resolved, especially surrounding past and present clearing of native forest for plantation establishment. The result is a standard that risks poor understanding and acceptance.
- Regulation, public infrastructure payments and resource fees are not transparent.
- Standard forestry techniques do not take into account specific forest types and their different management needs.

All of these issues have been compounded by 40 years of dramatic changes in natural resource management thinking. Forestry is not the only area where the conversion of natural systems to primary production has been related to damage to the environment, or where there is growing awareness of reduced future production potential. The total costs of resource exploitation have never been internalised and offset against the value of the resource. Such costs include

infrastructure establishment, environmental restoration and the loss of ecosystem services. In hindsight, practices introduced and developed since European settlement have not been the best ways to treat Australia's natural systems and resources. The result: loss of native forest access by slow attrition, with a high probability that a future timber industry will have access only to plantations.

Particularly divisive has been the debate over the logging of high-conservation-value systems and the conversion of native forests, using modern mechanised techniques, to plantations and other forms of land use. The arguments on one side have been about jobs, social issues, production and economics, and those on the other about aesthetics, biodiversity, ecosystem services, pollution and sustainable natural resource management. To resolve these issues, there has been a major move towards protected forest areas, improved resource planning through mechanisms such as the RFAs, good forest management practices that can be codified and certified to provide market drivers, and, at the other end of the continuum, strict government regulation.

This broad suite of processes has certainly moved Australia's forestry forward and seen major improvements in practices, but it has done little to defuse the at-times poisonous public debate. The Australian government does, however, realise the importance of forests in terms of timber and non-timber products, biodiversity, heritage and aesthetics, and has agreed to international standards for forest protection. Accordingly, it has become national policy

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that 15 per cent of the pre-1750 extent of each forest type will be protected for the future. Such a policy sets very clear standards, notwithstanding the issues still to be resolved concerning the definition of forest types and what happens to those that have already fallen below the 15 per cent mark.

The remaining 85 per cent in most cases predominates and remains a crucial part of the natural forest resource, essential for biodiversity conservation through the provision of a protected area 'safety net'. So what then happens to that 85 per cent? There are some that say that no forestry activity is legitimate simply because they are native forests. The reality is that their 'value' must be realised, and forestry is indeed part of this equation. If forests outside of protected areas are not highly valued by the community, then conservation of the whole resource is put in doubt.

So what are the ways forward and how do we learn from what has already happened here and overseas? The steps needed to take the conflict out of forest policy and management may look like this:

- Accept that 15 per cent of pre-1750 forests are our protected area 'safety net', and ensure that restoration occurs for those that currently fall below the benchmark.
- Ensure that adequate funds and expertise are devoted to the management of these protected forests.
- Consider forests outside protected areas as a vital part of the natural resource that will be handed intact to future generations.
- Accept that natural forests have value beyond timber production.
- Ensure that land-management planning operates on a landscape scale, and devote lands best suited for plantation establishment to that purpose.
- Adopt a good-governance, whole-of-government, triple-bottom-line approach to forest-management planning.
- Ensure transparency in policy development, regulation and forest management through a form of third-party certification, where consultation with all stakeholders has set the rules.
- Provide resource security that ensures that sustainable forest productivity is not compromised.
- Adopt a forestry cycle that matches forest sustainability requirements rather than forest industry needs.

If we are to have a viable native forest industry in the future, it is essential to engage the community on forest values and defuse the current conflict through the engagement of trusted intermediaries to define future forest practices. These intermediaries and stakeholders that cover industry and government interests would go through the type of process outlined by organisations such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

The FSC concept is simple: The community uses timber and other outputs of the timber industry, such as wood products and paper, on a daily basis, yet it has no understanding of where the products come from or whether the forests producing them are well or poorly managed. This same community would choose and, in some cases, pay more for a product that comes from a well-managed forest - in effect choosing to use 'good' rather than 'bad' wood. The experience in similar communities overseas and the acceptance in Australia of individual responsibility for resources and the environment (such as in kerbside recycling and water conservation) underline the potential success of such initiatives.

The setting of management standards that will apply at a national and forest level, while at the same time providing comfort across the community, is an absolutely critical step. Previous resource



management initiatives, even the most recent, have fallen short of community needs mainly because they have been imposed by government officials and forestry professionals who have a robust timber industry as their main, if not only, focus, rather than being driven by the desire to create standards that are environmentally acceptable, socially appropriate and financially viable.

For standards to work, they must be transparent, independent and prepared in a way that balances the interests of all stakeholders - ensuring that no one entity dominates - and allows all interested people and groups to participate. Application of these standards consistently and reliably must be assured. Therefore, a system of third-party accredited certifiers must be set up and maintained.

Another critical feature is a transparent chain of custody that ensures that certified forest products are truly represented in the products offered to retail customers.

This, therefore, sets up a process whereby good forest practice is driven by the consumer market and characterised as follows:

- Preferential retail selection of 'good' products by consumers, thus rewarding those in the industry prepared to apply high standards of resource management with greater market access.
- A process that is not dominated by government or industry.
- All stakeholders having the opportunity to set the standards of forest management that they want to see applied.

Internationally, large tracts of forest have been certified using this type of system. For instance, the FSC, after only 10 years, has more than 55 million hectares of forest certified. Australia has been a late starter, but has realised that access to major international markets requires reputable certification of its products.

Thus, in an 18-month period over 2004 and 2005, we saw 550,000 hectares of Australian plantations certified and the first shipment of FSC-standard woodchip for paper manufacture exported. Manufacturers and suppliers of timber-based products are driving the certification process because of customer demands. This has

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certainly been the Australian experience. After many years of implacable opposition to international certification practices, dramatic changes in international timber product markets have turned many in the industry into enthusiastic supporters.

The one downside in Australia is the continuation in some states and territories of native vegetation clearing for the establishment of plantations. This is a short-sighted and high-risk strategy that will preclude the possibility of reputable certification and compromise their economic future.

How do we progress beyond the current state of affairs, where we have plantations - but not one native forest - certified by a credible international entity? The origin of this impasse lies in the entrenched hostility between a majority of conservation groups and the forest industry. This is a long-standing war, notable for the extreme positions on both sides, which at the end of the day are likely to be shown to be seriously detrimental to Australia's forests.

There needs to be majority agreement among conservation groups to start the native forest certification process. It is therefore essential for the parties to engage in meaningful dialogue if we are to jumpstart the process. It won't be an easy task, but the signs are more promising than ever that now is the time to start. Entrenched positions must be abandoned and the ultimate health of our native forests and the advantages they can provide to our community must be honestly and openly discussed. It would take a 'Superman' facilitator, but oh, how sweet success would be.

If we are truly interested in protecting Australia's unique forested landscapes, the huge wealth of biodiversity they support and the ecosystem services they provide, then any move towards greater sustainability must be our goal. Such a goal is vital, as it is unlikely that Australia will ever be able to afford the purist view that the only good forest is a protected one.

The reality is that we will have protected forests that extend to at least 15 per cent of their original area and, hopefully, the resources to manage them in better fashion than we do today.

At the same time, those forests on both public and private lands but outside of protected areas will be well managed for the biodiversity they contain and the timber products and ecosystem services they produce. There will also be a process in place that will restore great areas of forest. Some will be plantations but there will also be major areas of wild forest that will add to the native production forests and protected areas of the future.