Wombat Community Forest Management
Process, Progress & Issues

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Introduction

The communities in and around Wombat State Forest have been given the opportunity of implementing the pilot for Community Forest Management. This will be a first on public land in Victoria and possibly Nationally.

Community Forest Management is a well-established and fast growing reality in many other parts of the world. Canada has the widespread Model Forestry movement, parts of the United States have moved in to CFM, in Mexico over 1500 groups and communities run their forests form tendering, harvesting, processing and finally producing products from their timber. Nepal has over 11 000 forest community groups and in India there are 63 000 communities managing the forest and re-afforestation programs. CFM is being implemented across the African continent as well as very good examples in England and Europe.

After decades of heated conflict over forest management and utilisation in Australia, it is exciting that the Wombat Forest, itself the scene of long term community concern and recent direct action, has the opportunity to forge new and constructive alternatives.

If all participants within the forest issues are really concerned about achieving the best possible future for our forests, then it is time for everyone to sit together and work on strategies that will ensure the best environmental, social and economic outcomes. The Wombat campaign has been quite unique in the way that the many different interest groups had been able to work cooperatively in its attempts to get previous governments to admit that there were major issues over sustainability. The failure of the previous State Government to face up to the reality inevitably opened the door to the more radical right-wing of the forest movement to enter the local issue. An outcome of this change was the creation of deep divisions within the local community.

The Bracks Government engaged Prof. Jerry Vanclay form Southern Cross University to review the Statewide sustainable sawlog yields in 2001. The findings of this Review produced and average reduction across the State of 31% and a massive 79% in the Midlands Forest Management Area, which includes the Wombat Forest.

As part of the reforms announced under the Our Forests Our Future model, the Government announced that the Wombat Forest would be given the opportunity for the Community Forest Management pilot and determination over the future of the forest.

This was far from the ideal scenario with which to commence the CFM process. The Start-up Process has been has been progressing for the past 6 months. This has seen the community embrace the opportunity and look at alternatives from many other parts of the globe.

This paper will look at the recent past in order to put the current situation into context. It will then examine the steps made over the past six months and issues and opportunities that have developed. The main body of the paper will follow the sequence that the CFM Introductory presentation and expand some of these points to include emerging issues.

It has been a credit to the people of this region and the other participants from the over 100 user and interest groups and authorities that have put the past behind, buried many past animosities and worked in a mature way to lay the foundations of what appears to be a successful lead in to Community Forest Management.

Background

The Wombat State Forest is located about 50 km west of Melbourne. The forest is approximately 70 000 ha in gross area and stretches primarily between Woodend and Daylesford.

The Wombat forest was effectively cut down during the gold-rush times of the mid to late 1800. The Royal Commission set up to look into the destruction of the Forest in the late 1890, described it as the 'ruined forest'. This resulted in the forest being closed and for 50 years; the only activities were aimed at rebuilding the structure of the forest. The forest was re-opened during and after the 2nd World War. Logging at that time was aimed also at Stand Improvement, with 'Silvicultural Selection' carried out.

In the three decades that followed, the local industry was only allowed to thin the forest for the primary products of lamp-posts and small sized logs for milling. There was great attachment and pride within the local timber families for the forest. Their work was pivotal in the restoration of the Wombat Forest that today's forest campaigners have fought for.

By the late 1960s, discussions had started between the Forest Commission and forest scientists about the lack of regeneration in the forest from logging. As a result a new form of silviculture known as 'shelterwood' was introduced in the mid-1970s. This involved the removal of approximately 60% of all trees in the first phase, a regeneration burn was then carried out and the final removal scheduled for 20 years later.

During the Land Conservation Council assessment processes of the 1970s and 80s, large areas of the Wombat Forest were considered for conversion to 'pine plantations'. This saw organised campaigns against this conversion, from residents of the region. There were large sections of the western end of the Wombat Forest bulldozed and converted to pines. It is ironic that some of the region's newer forest activists are calling for plantations to be used as a replacement for native timber, in effect condoning the destruction of native forest.

The mid 1980s saw the introduction of the Timber Industry Strategy and the setting of regional sustainable yields. Forest Management Areas were formed and the Midlands FMA comprising the Wombat, Enfield, Mt Cole and Cobaw Forests was created. The sustainable yield was based on historical sawlog license levels of around 70 000m3 per annum, with a further 63 000 tonnes of waste going as woodchip to the CSR Bacchus Marsh hardboard plant.

By the mid to late 1980s sections of the local timber industry were raising concerns over sustainability. They believed that the area cut annually was too high. Despite lobbying at many levels, the local industry was told that 'they did not know what they were talking about' and to be silent.

The start of the 1990s saw more local discontent over the forest. A 'Community Liaison Group' formed and the same issues of sustainability were raised. At the same time the then Department of Conservation & Environment decided to move to a more intense form of shelterwood, that saw closer to 80% of all trees removed and the second and final harvest planned for 10 years later. A major shortcoming of the system at that time was the failure to adjust sawlog volumes based on the alterations to the silvicultural prescriptions. You cannot take more trees out in the short term, halve the growth advantage that retained trees were meant to have, and not have a significant impact of the 'Sustainable Sawlog Volume'. This time also saw the introduction of a second woodchipping operation, which doubled the licensed volumes out of the Wombat and the Midlands.

In 1994 an alliance between some of the traditional timber families and conservationist within the area saw the creation of the Wombat Forest Society. The primary aim was to challenge the unsustainable logging levels and end the export woodchipping. The WFS spent the next 6 years developing forest modelling and auditing systems that ultimately triggered the Bracks Government's review into Statewide Sustainable Yield, headed by Jerry Vanclay form Southern Cross University. This review

validated the Society's own findings[1]. The WFS believed in working within process and actively worked to allow all sides within the community to have their say. The situation in the area was unique in the cooperative way in which most sections of the community worked together on this issue, while respecting ideological differences. The WFS had lobbied for Community Forest Management as a progressive solution to the problem.

During the late 1990s a wave of new groups started with the aim of fighting the Regional Forest Agreements and closing the Wombat Forest to logging. Many of these people opted for the type of forest campaign seen in other areas, centered around a media-driven approach and blockading. Emerging from the newer groups were individuals with personal political ambition who seemed to use the divisions and actions in the forest as a vehicle to raise their profile prior to the 2002 State election.

This change in climate saw many long-term participants in the Wombat Issue become the subject of abuse. This atmosphere led many of these people to withdraw from participation. This has been an immense loss to the debate, as some have been observing and studying that Wombat Forest for decades and have very valuable information to contribute.

The Bracks Government announced one of the most significant reforms to Victoria's forests in early 2002, with the 'Our Forests Our Future' package. This saw the Midlands' sustainable sawlog yield levels slashed to 8 600m pa (Note: 72 000m3 in 1996). There was a corresponding average reduction of 31% across the State. A part of these reforms was the announcement that the community would have determination over the management of the Wombat Forest.) *"The Bracks Government will work with the Wombat Forest community and the local industry, and will phase out logging by 2009 if local industry and community decide that is the best way to manage the forest in the future."*[2]

A further announcement was made, along with the suspension of the Regional Forest Reference Groups in April 2002. The media release also announced that…"*Ms Garbutt said implementation of the wider number of reforms announced by the Bracks Government would require comprehensive consultation with industry and affected communities and pointed to the development of a community forest management model in the Wombat Forest as (a) key example of this.*

A group will be established in the Wombat Forest to determine the most appropriate ways of involving the community in decisions on the management of the forest into the future.

Should the Wombat experience prove workable, this sort of model could be applied to other selected parts of the State.[3]

Later in 2002, the Government appointed a team of consultants including John Petheram and Peter Stephens from Melbourne University School of Resource Management, and Don Gilmour with over 40 years of experience including work within Community Forest Management and IUCN overseas. The team produced a discussion paper that was released in October 2002. This provided a starting point for the Wombat Communities to look at the potential of CFM, as well as examples from overseas. The report also examined some issues to be considered locally and suggestions on how a CFM process could be implemented and 'ways of operating' within the community.

A process of community consultation was commenced in late 2002 to investigate the expectations of the community, as well as whether the community wanted to tackle the CFM opportunity. Christine Forster, who has extensive involvement in rural resource management processes in Victoria, headed this process. Dr Anitra Nelson of RMIT facilitated a series of meetings around the region and in Melbourne to gauge expectations and involvement in the Wombat issue. These meetings culminated

[1] 600 Jobs to go in logging shakeup. Sarah Hudsun. Herald Sun. 21 February 2002.
[2] Government Acts to Protect Forests and Workers. Media Release. Office of the Premier. 21 February, 2002.
[3] Suspension of Regional Forest Reference Groups. Media Release. Minister for Environment and Conservation. 17 April 2002.

in a combined interest, user and stakeholder group meeting in mid-November that saw the participants give support to moving into Community Forest Management.

Start-up Process

The process of steadfastly beginning the CFM process was moved on in April; 2003 with the appointment a Community Development Officer to work between the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the community and stakeholders.

As part of the 'Start-up' process, a range of introductory and background material was produced, including a Wombat CFM Resource CD, which is a compendium of articles relating to CFM and community resource management from overseas as well as related topics. State and Commonwealth reports and research relating to the Wombat and Western Victoria. A range of discussion papers and allied CFM resources have also been developed and distributed.

The rear Conference Room of the Daylesford Department of Sustainability & Environment office is being developed as an interim Wombat CFM resource room. This space will have internet access, photocopying facilities, a meeting space and a resource library.

The Statewide Forest Resource Inventory section of DSE is producing a groundbreaking CD based mapping and analysis tool for the Wombat CFM that allows the community to create and plan differing forest scenarios based on up to date spatial information. The CD uses an ESRI shareware GIS program that allows limited but useful interactivity. There are currently a number of community members testing a prototype tool. The developed version will be licensed to the Wombat CFM Group and will contain a range of social, economic and environmental information. It is intended for release in early November 2003 and a series of training sessions will be run by DSE on using the CD. Parts of the community that have seen the prototype have already seen fantastic opportunities for community strategies around fire-protection planning and other groups are using it as a tool for submissions relating to roadworks within the context of roadside conservation.

Some of the community initiatives already emerging have shown a strong interest in bringing a wide range of possibilities surrounding the forest and the community together in a Wombat Forest Centre. Ideas include a venue for the delivery of forest related educational courses and centralised education centre, a research centre, seed bank, propagation and nursery, traineeship base, forest resource library, meeting place, computer laboratory have been suggested so far. A number of applications for external funding for some of the above aspects have been made.

The Wombat Forest is arguably the most studied forest in Australia. A positive development has been the bringing together of interested members of the local community with people carrying out research. These local volunteers are more than willing and able to do some of the field recording and legwork, which can be of great benefit to the researches.

Other 'spin-offs' are the experience and knowledge that the community participants will gain: and for the researcher, access to local people with good local knowledge can be of enormous assistance.

Wombat Moves into Community Forest Management

The following section is an explanation of the material presented during the recent round of Community Forest Management meetings that will illustrate the process to date. Included in this explanation are some issues that have arisen during this process that are relevant to the progression into full Community Forest Management of the Wombat Forest.

Consultation- the community will define itself

There is a strong interest from groups and individuals from a number of towns and hamlets in and around the Wombat Forest. It is recognised that these communities have a strong sense of identity and knowledge with the forest areas around their town or hamlet. In the interim sawlog supply process that is has been running parallel to the implementation of CFM, a number of the active people and groups, especially from the conservation and preservation positions, have built an informal 'hierarchy of influence' that placed the immediate 'local geographic group' as the final decision makers. There have been instances when this representation has been challenged by some within these networks, in a manner that will need to be resolved by the process, through time.

There is a natural belief by some of the locally active participants that they are the primary players in CFM process. While some CFM models do rightfully place strong value on the local perspective, in the case of the Wombat Forest there are also over 100 user and interest group, some of which have very long association with the forest. Some walking and field naturalist groups have records of decades of use and observation. This is a circumstance when the context of 'community' transcends any geographic definition.

A strong feature of CFM globally is the importance of 'local interest and local knowledge'. The Suzuki Foundation Principles for Sustainable Forestry on British Columbia's Coast – 'A Cut Above'[4] fourth Principle is to – 'Ensure local knowledge and control are central to decision-making and planning' and the WhiteFeather Forest first principle is the 'recognition of the vitality of local interest'.

It is important that this process can be tailored to fit the way the community wants define itself. One of the criticisms of many processes relating to forests in the past, has been the way the community has been expected to fit into processes that are designed and that suit institutions well removed from the local community. This has been one of the reasons why so many reach an endpoint with little community ownership or acceptance.

The aim of the CFM meetings in towns and hamlets around the Wombat was to broaden the local understanding of the potential of Community Forest Management by looking at the extent and strength of CFM internationally. The presentation also illustrated that CFM will not simply be about whether logging does or does not happen, that there are a vast number of issues to be dealt with. The contents page (below) from the Midlands FMA Plan shows what were considered to be the main the areas of management at that time:

- Planning Process
- Legislative and Policy
- Forest Management Zones
- Biodiversity & Conservation
- Timber Production
- Non-timber resources
- Forest Protection
- Recreation & Tourism
- Cultural Heritage
- Roads & Forest Works
- Research
- Education
- Streams & Catchments

[4] A Cut Above. Ronnie Drever MRM. Suzuki Foundation. British Columbia. 2000

During the CFM meetings fire protection, firewood, roading and logging emerged as the 'hot ticket' items within the community's consciousness.

The Process

These series of meetings in 2003 also outlined the CFM process and timetable and asked each town to nominate two representatives to attend one or two workshops that to design the shape of the Wombat CFM management structure. The representatives were to be from 2 different organisations from each town. While many said this was a difficult task, one aim was to get the towns to start to organise for CFM. This means that at some stage communication strategies will need to be developed within and across the communities of the region and this was considered to be as good a staring point as any.

Some communities carried this task out in a consultative way while others appear to have had a single clique of people simply nominate 2 of their group. This problem was exposed by follow up phone calls from other members of these communities complaining that there was no consultation.

One feature of these meetings was the low numbers from some towns. In investigating the reasons, it seems that a large number of people who were active and interested in the past will not participate now because of the sometimes-aggressive behaviour that has erupted in some public meetings. This is a sad loss to the potential of CFM, as some of the people that have suspended their involvement have decades of knowledge on the Wombat Forest. Modes of behaviour are now being introduced to produce a safe and respectful atmosphere during meetings. Over time those that are hesitant at participating may return.

The next phase of meetings were for the interest and user groups as well the authorities, shires and industries. These meetings were exactly the same as the geographic interest meetings, with the exception that each organisation or group was asked to nominate one representative.

One of the points made during all of these community meetings was that the representatives were for only one phase of the process (to design a CFM management structure), and that the representatives would ideally be people with experience on Boards or on committees or within organisational structures. An observation has been that most groups still nominated their more active participants within the current forest context and not those with previous organisational experience.

There is no doubt that jostling is occurring aimed at building personal and organisational position into the CFM process. This would seem to be at the expense of true democracy within their communities. Attempts at using the CFM vehicle to bring about personal agendas could seriously compromise the CFM process at one end and seriously lessen the capacity and depth of any CFM management structure at another other end.

The way that participants on all sides speak is still about factions, other groups, other institutions and similar divisions. It should be an aim of any collaborative process to see an end to this sort of attitude. Surely it is the 'unity in community' that is the desired outcome.

When all participants start to talk of a collective and inclusive singularity will be when the Wombat Forest has the best opportunity for management that is holistic.

Figure 1 depicts the flow of activities in the CFM start-up phase, including the outcomes sought.

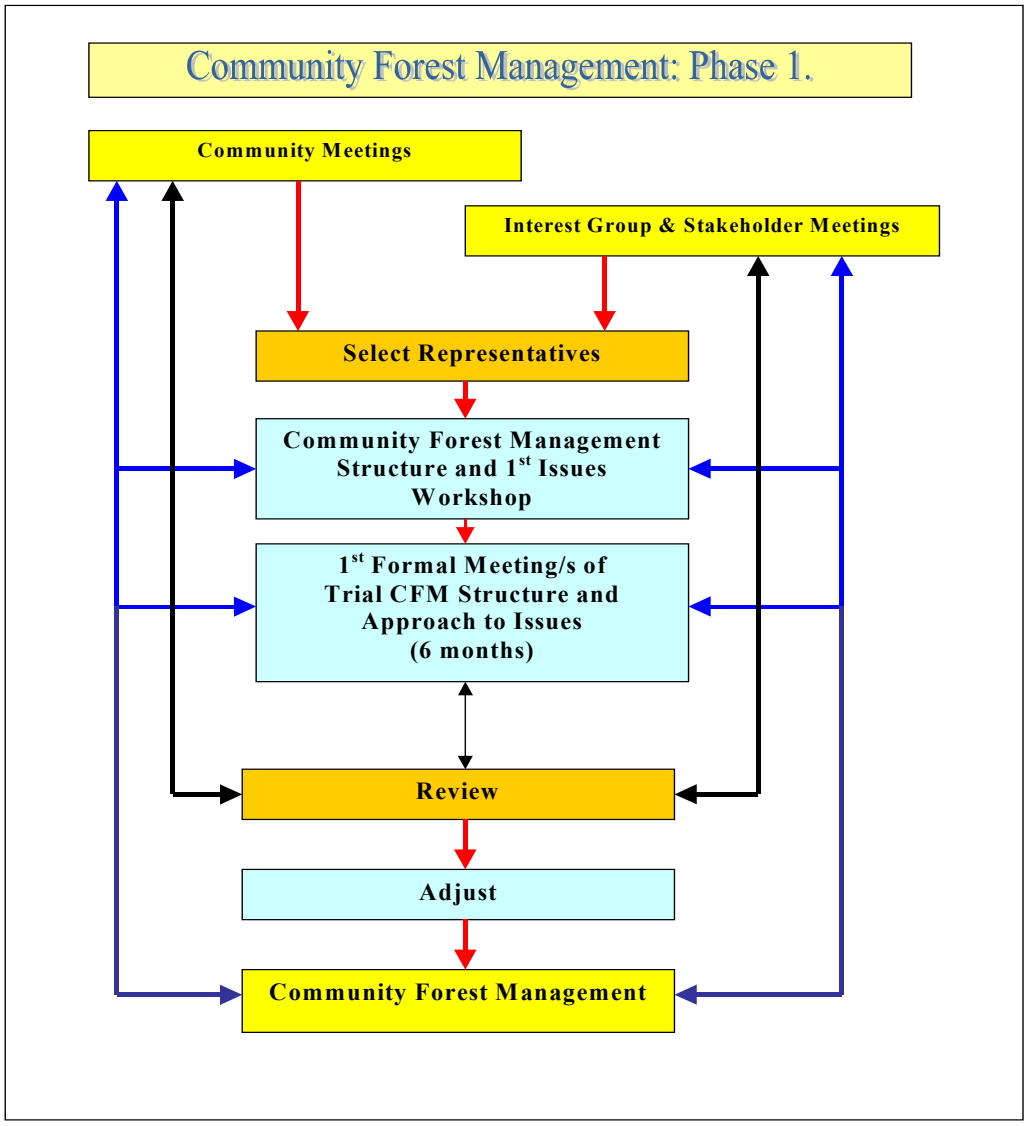


Figure 1. The flow of activities in the CFM start-up phase, including the outcomes sought

The Presentation to Community Meetings

The aspects of CFM and the CFM process covered during the meetings looked at:
The driver for CFM in many areas around the world has been (1) the gap between intensive forest management and the broader community's unease at this type of activity in forested areas and (2) the shifts towards greater engagement and satisfaction with their forests, particularly on a local level.

The main topics covered during the public meetings were:

1. *Alternative systems of management*

During discussions between multiple stakeholders in the forest and in meetings, there has been the introduction of concepts that are new to forestry in Victoria. These have included ecoforestry, restoration forestry, community resource management, Suzuki Foundation and Deep Ecology. Whilst these ideas may seem new and perhaps a bit radical to some, the reality is that these concepts are the 'norm' in other parts of the world. It is encouraging that people are thinking and looking 'outside the box'.

The Wombat CFM Resource CD contains many references and papers on a wide range of these methods. Attached to this paper is a list of useful web-sites on these issues.

2. Management issues

The move to CFM will involve people approaching the process and considering roles under CFM from the perspective of 4 principles:

- Interest
- Knowledge
- Authority
- Responsibility/ Liability

There will be a wide range of groups, institutions and individuals that will be involved for as many reasons as there are participants. Some will have strong long-term ties to the forest, while others will only want a peripheral involvement. The CFM process needs to keep this in mind at all times.

3. The Division of Roles under CFM

The 4 principles above will be applied to all areas of management. This will see the list of management areas of management divided between the various participating bodies and the community. The Chapter headings from the Midlands FMA Plan will be adopted as a starting point:

- Planning Process
- Legislative and Policy
- Forest Management Zones
- Biodiversity & Conservation
- Timber Production
- Non-timber resources
- Forest Protection
- Recreation & Tourism
- Cultural Heritage
- Roads & Forest Works
- Research
- Education
- Streams & Catchment

There will be some obvious allocations of responsibility. For instance the community may well be much more interested and perhaps capable of managing recreation, tourism and heritage, while the ultimate liability and 'duty of care' responsibilities will probably see areas such as fire protection, roading and enforcement allocated to the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The Forests Act (1958) currently determines the roles and responsibilities of the Minister and the Departmental Secretary. This does place some boundaries on the extent to which the community can take responsibility, and hence on the boundaries of Forest to be managed. The Government is currently re-writing the Forests Act to reflect contemporary Victorian attitudes, and provisions recognising CFM are to be included.

There will also be a range of issues to be 'shared' between the management agency and the community (Figure 2). This may include jointly developed prescriptions or strategies for some areas, such as catchments or long-term biodiversity planning.

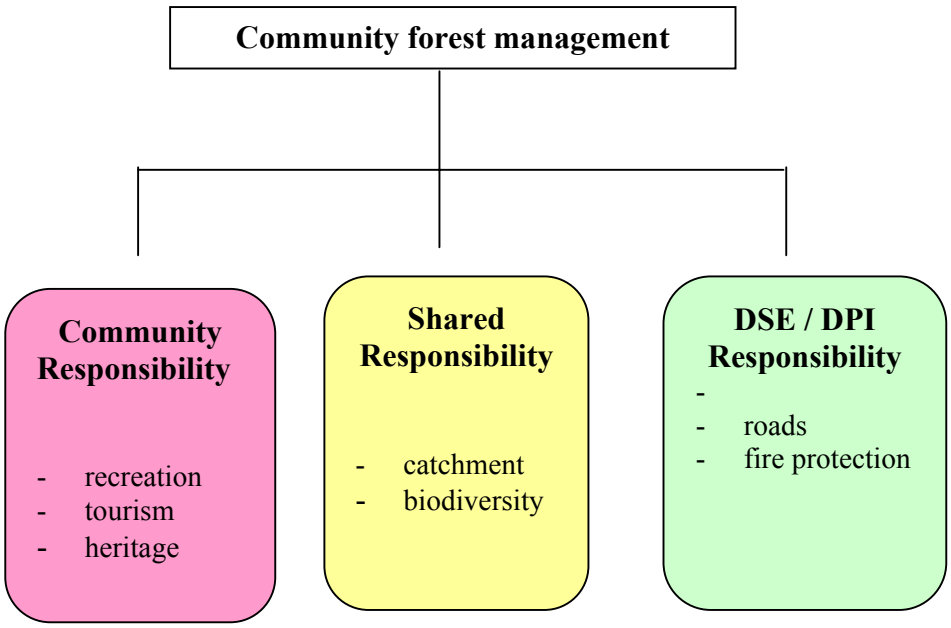


Figure 2. Example of possible division of roles in community management (based on interest, knowledge, authority and responsibility)

With the geographic distribution of people in and around the Wombat Forest, the opportunities for community monitoring and surveying has the potential for important research as part of the CFM model. The SFRI Forest Explorer CD has an inbuilt feedback mechanism to allow for periodic observations and correcting from the community, to be used to improve the accuracy of DSE's data sets.

4. Different values,needs and uses

The challenge of the CFM process will be ensuring that the processes will involve a host of participants who will arrive at the table with a wide range of 'values, needs and uses'. This will mean the CFM process will have to strive to find balance and trust between sometimes competing sectors. This will require participants looking at the collective good and not at what is best for the individual.

Given the history of the issue over the past few years, there are some very polarised opinions. A positive aspect of the CFM lead-in process has been the re-engagement of some of people that have not been a part of the polarisation and who can bring broad and tolerant influence into the process. There is an atmosphere of cooperation finally emerging.

5. Community forest management structure

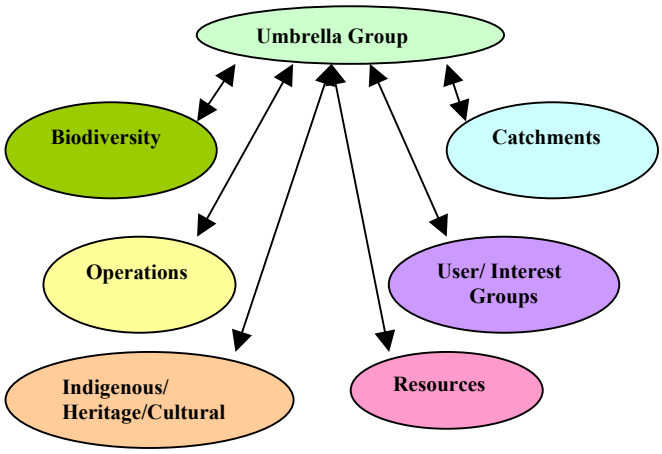
A number of possible models of CFM have been put forward as starting points for the exploration and development of the Wombat CFM Model. An examination of CFM Models around the world shows that no two Models are the same as they have all evolved in a way that satisfies the uses, needs and values of their society and forests. The CFM structures need to be adaptable to change and evolution. It is inevitable that over time that changes will need to made to CFM structures and operations.

The issue of how the Community Forest Management Structure will look is currently being tackled by the participating representatives. As a starting point for this exploration, we need to decide whether the Structure follows a typical 'Board' style hierarchical structure, or whether the Structure should adopt a 'Systems" or "Issues' based approach.

A Systems approach may look at the Wombat Forest as a series of headwaters, and at each part of the forest within the context of the whole of catchment or another natural division within the forest. Ecological Vegetation Classes offer another natural division.

An Issues-based Model could form committees, each one to deal with particular aspects of management. These committees may appoint one or two representatives to sit on a 'Whole of Forest Board' that make the big-picture decisions (see Figure 3).

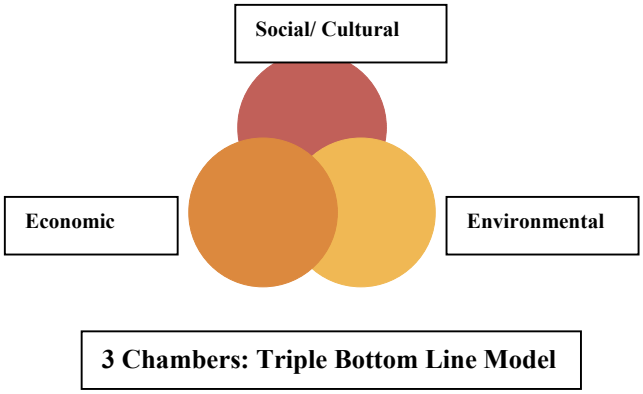
Another style of Structure being looked at is one based on the WhiteFeather Model Forest in Canada. This is a First Nation-managed working forest that is more in tune with indigenous systems of decision making and cooperation than the above 'western style' management systems.



Issues based Model

Model based on natural land units or divisions.
E.g. Catchment Boundaries- Wombat incorporated into a series of "Whole of Catchment" management models.

Natural Eco-system based Model



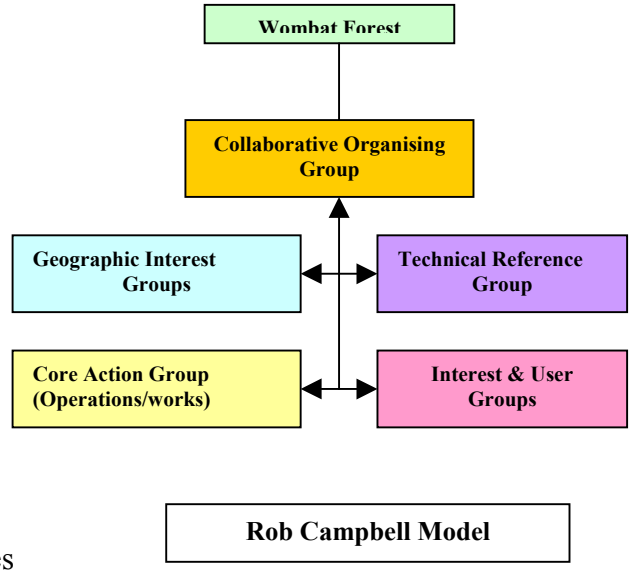


Figure 3. Some possible CF Management structures

6. Community Forest Management Structure Workshop Model

Figure 4 shows the model that was arrived at during the first Community Forest Management workshop. There was a strong emphasis on the names of the bodies under CFM. It was felt that the terminology needed to depart form convention and reflect a new attitude towards forest management. The model allowed for decisions to be made within the structure but recognises that some issues were of a nature that required the greater community to be consulted. Notes from the CFM Structure Workshop held at Savoia, Hepburn Springs, in Septemeber 2003 are shown in Appendix A (at end of this Proceedings booklet).

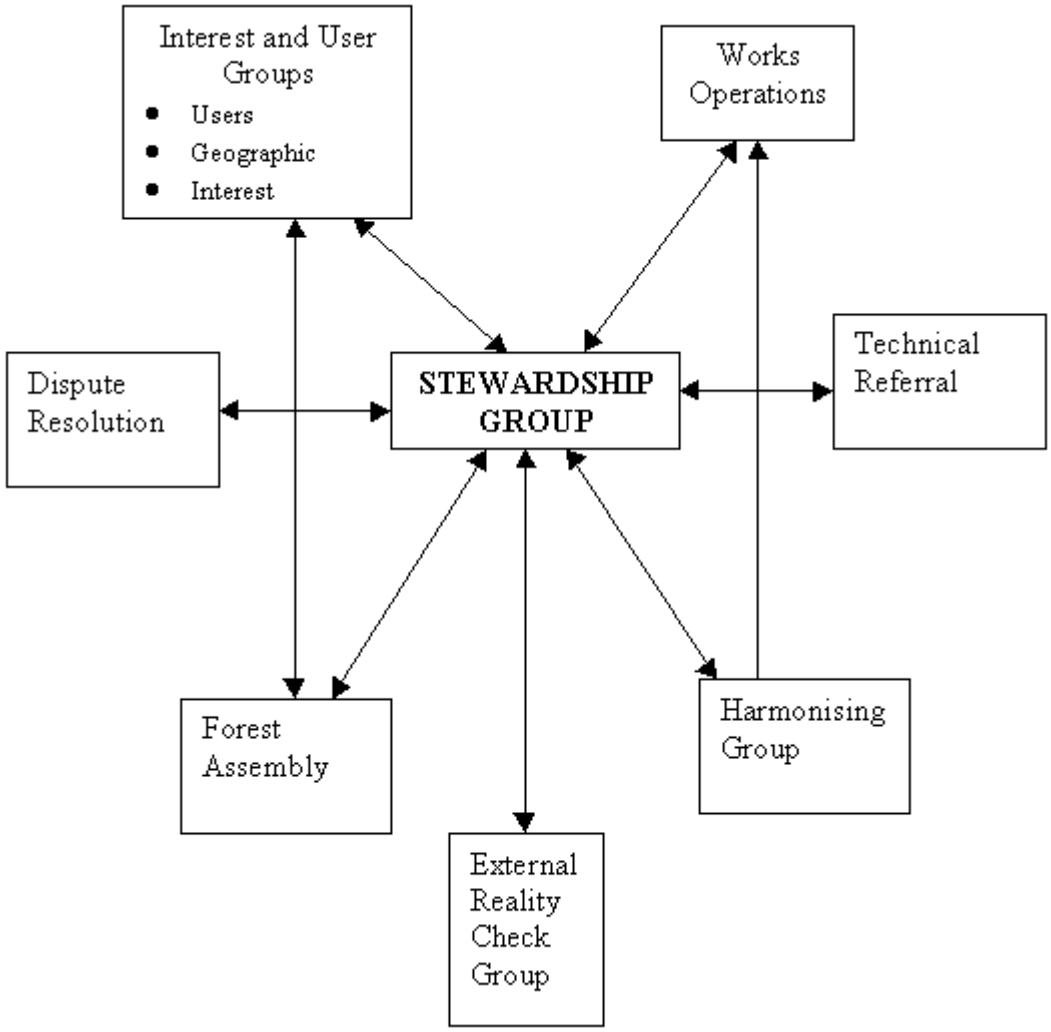


Figure 4. A tentative model developed at a first CFM workshop on the Wombat Forest

This model also builds in a dispute resolution capacity, and an interesting concept that incorporates an external and detached 'Reality Check Group'. This is aimed at periodic third-party review of the CFM's direction. Some suggestions have been made that this could be a part of a 'Sister-Community Forest Management Relationship' with an overseas community involved in a similar endeavor.

7. Who is the Community?

One of the challengers for the CFM will be the concept of 'who is the community'? While most of the active participants are from the general geographic region, the data-base for the Wombat contains in excess of 100 user groups, including bushwalkers, field naturalists, apiarists, defense force, car clubs, orienteering clubs, horse riding clubs and a plethora of other groups,

There is also a cluster of Authorities and similar bodies with direct input, involvement and users such as the water Boards, Catchment Management Authorities, Shires, Department of

Sustainabiltiy and Environment, Country Fire Authorities , Commercial Interests, Timber Industry, Prospectors, Fire-wood cutters etc.

The Wombat Forest is a public forest and therefore every Victorian is in effect a shareholder and the structure needs to be accessible and accountable to all Victorians. Added to this are the Commonwealth obligations, Legislation and Agreements that effectively give all Australians an interest in the Wombat Forest and International Treaties and Agreements have the potential for global responsibilities too.

This means that the CFM structure and process needs to be constantly mindful that it should not form around a clique of local interests and people. There have been many requests from many sectors across the State for a Virtual Wombat CFM to be created to allow remote access and input into the CFM model. Steps will be made to design and build an informative and interactive web-site as a step to satisfy this need.

8. History

It will be important that the CFM process has an efficient method of recording the progression of exploration and discussions on all aspects of the process. There will necessarily be a wide range of quite detailed discussions on every aspect of the forest management. This will see shifts in views and changes in the implementation of CFM management within the Wombat Forest.

It is inevitable that as the CFM moves through time, a wide range of people and groups will become involved and over time withdraw their involvement. Some people that cease to be involved may re-enter the process. In the interests of efficiency and understanding, a system of recording and tracking the discussions, research and decisions will be vital. This will allow new and re-engaging groups and individuals to appreciate where and why things are being done under the Community Forest Management.

It is important that steps are taken to record what is being done under CFM and why. This needs to be correlated and measures put into place to ensure that it will be available and accessible into the future. Subsequent generations will want to know how and why things have been done under the Community Forest Management system.

9. What needs to be Left Behind - The Past

There are sections of the community with deep pain and anger over issues from the past. The CFM and the scope that the current Government has given this community and this forest gives everyone the opportunity to put the past where it belongs, in the past. There is the opportunity for many people, groups and institutions to build new and beneficial relationships and for healing issues from the past. To move on to looking at positive ways of working together, founded on looking for, and implementing ‘what is best for the Wombat Forest’.

People that want to wallow in the past and persistently dredge up past issues will only impede moving forward. There have already been signs of frustration and comment from the broader participants in the lead-in CFM process towards those that wish to maintain negativity, to move on.

The clear motto needs to be that ‘CFM is about the future’.

10. Language

One feature of the CFM process that can have an enormous effect on how we progress is 'language'. This can operate on may levels. The obvious manifestation is the way people communicate with each other. There seems to be a belief or misguided cliche that to be effective within the forest arena you need to be loud and abusive.

The CFM process is being based on some simple and yet clear standards of behaviors and well-established principles of collaboration. Those that lack self-discipline or will not act constructively will now be subject to censure from their fellow community members. A new tolerance for people with differing needs, values and uses is mandatory for this CFM process.

There is also the over-use of often technical, jargonistic language and strings of acronyms that can make the topic almost incomprehensible to newcomers to the issue. While those involved for a long period of time may find the technical speak as efficient, efforts need to made to ensure that written and spoken communication is understandable to all.

11. Dispute Resolution

One of the features of all CFM structures is an established conflict resolution mechanism. There are many approaches to managing conflict. The general or most desirable aim of any Community Forest Management process is to reach consensus on all decisions. There will inevitably be times when this cannot be reached or times when personalities will clash.

If all involved in a CFM process know that there are specific triggers that enact a depute resolution model that everyone understands, then disruptions to the progress of the Community Forest Management process can be minimised.

The Wombat CFM Resource CD contains many examples and a wide range of models. In the short term the most expedient way for the Wombat CFM structure to deal with this aspect may well be to take one of the existing models from overseas and if needed adapt it to the local situation.

12. Risks

One of the major 'risks' that any CFM structure faces is that over time it can become disconnected from the broader community. There can be a number of reasons for this, some relating to the design of the management structure, some the way the structure operates and some due to the failure of the broader community to keep informed and engaged in the processes.

If the management structure is, or appears to be, closed or hard to access or elitist or a clique then over time the community will become disengaged out of frustration or rebel against the management.

13. Knowledge and Information

One of the positive aspects of the lead in to the Wombat Community Forest Management has been the recognition by some of the active groups and individuals for the need for a sound knowledge base from which to make informed and hopefully the 'best' decisions during the interim sawlog supply process. The Glenlyon, Wheatsheaf & Coomoora Forest Community

have initiated information days in conjunction with the Creswick campus of Melbourne University Forestry.

These events looked at different logging technics in the Creswick State Forest' 12 years on from the logging operation. A month later the group also organised a day in the upper Coliban part of the Wombat with Dr Kevin Tolhurst who walked around his research area and explained how a forest lives and interacts. These days have been very good at satisfying a need for more information but also creating an environment for social interactions between a number of people form different backgrounds.

If the aim of 'the best forest management and practices' under CFM is to be realised, some serious steps need to be taken to develop simple and effective 'Pathways to Information or Knowledge'. One of the issues that has emerged, especially in relation to the interim sawlog supply process in an area of degraded forest nominated by the Glenlyon group. Four assessment teams were formed to look at Biodiversity, Soils and Hydrology, Silviculture and Heritage (both Indigenous and European). These teams were comprise of a DSE/DPI expert in each field, an academic or independent scientist and one or two community experts in each field.

Members of the Glenlyon community also assisted a postgraduate student from Ballarat University during a month of biodiversity surveying in the Mudlark area. This illustrates the emerging opportunities of marrying research and the community.

These teams carried out their assessments and produced reports that the Glenlyon Group then used as the basis for the drafting of a long-sighted 'Restoration Plan' for the area. One obvious issue was the difficulty that people new to the issue had accessing or even knowing of existing technical and other relevant information. This saw the wheel re-invented a number of times and a prolonging of the process for the Glenlyon Group, adding to the burnout factor for the more active members.

There have also been situations that have complicated the issue that could have been easily resolved with information that some people already had or could be easily access. The point that has emerged form this experience is the need for easily and intuitively accessible information delivery systems. The Wombat CFM Resource CD contains a vast number of existing reports and information on the Wombat Forest, the Midlands Forest Management Area, Western Victoria and the whole of Victoria, It is quite amazing that in excess of 30 000 pages of information can be put onto a $1 piece of plastic and copied and distributed so easily. Around 200 copies of the CD have been distributed across the community, with requests that the recipients burn further copies and distribute those to people who are asked to copy their CD and distribute.

During the interim sawlog process, members of the community that required further information were supplied it directly, where possible. This was possibly not the best way of doing this. In normal life, the pursuit of information can be a journey with dead-ends, tangential diversions, frustration and eventually success. One of the advantages of this approach is often the other related and non-related information encountered along the journey. This means that when you encounter the need for other information the chance that you will know where to find it is enhanced.

A technical issue with access to information lies in the ability of rural communities to efficiently access on-line information down old copper phone lines. The Internet opens to door to mind-boggling arrays of information. The Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Primary Industry web-sites have a vast amount of good information covering all aspects of forest management and planning as well as allied areas such as Bio-Regions, Bio-Diversity, Soils and Catchments. The problem for rural people, who

are more likely to be the people that need and will use the information, is to surf the Department's web-sites for this range of information in any sort of efficient manner.

It is therefore vital that these institutions develop 'rural-friendly' products. Modern software is able to assemble whole or part web-sites as files that can be used exactly like the on-line sites, but with instantaneous movement from page to page. Sites are saved as a PDF file that is extremely space efficient. The combined DSE/DPI sites that contain over 20 000 pages of information can be reduced to less than 650m/bytes, or one CD Rom.

Conclusion

There is a growing need to break the intractable nature of the modern Australian forest debate. Warring parties standing in opposite corners hurling abuse has not and will not achieve 'ecologically sustainable management' of our native forests. The Wombat Community Forest Management initiative offers new possibilities to move from a divisive, conflict model into a cooperative and respectful system of management. In just 6 months we have seen an almost unimaginable shift in attitude and approach form all sides. There is now a realisation that forest management is not simply a 'black and white' issue centred around whether there is logging or no logging.

The CFM Structure Workshop held on 13 September 2003 in Hepburn Springs saw 50 people from a wide range of interests' work cooperatively and respectively together for a day for the best possible future for the Wombat Forest. The lead letter in The Age on Wednesday September 17 from Chris Murphy, a community representative form Lyonville South read:

"On Saturday, September 13, 2003, I had the good fortune to witness and participate in a historic event. After decades of disputes, violence and protests in relation to forest management in Australia, 50 local people met to start the process of community management of the Wombat State Forest.

People that only 12 months earlier were chaining themselves to trees sat down with the workers they disrupted, the departmental officers who authorised their arrests and the mill owners whose livelihoods they threatened. But rather than conflict, this meeting was about finding a sustainable solution for community-based forest management- and all of the parties worked amicably towards a vision of a forest managed locally by people who recognise it spiritual, economic, environmental and social benefits.

That the meeting took place is a testament to the courage of the Victorian Government to find real solutions to what, to many, seem intractable problems. While there will in undoubtedly be many missteps along the challenging path, the goodwill demonstrated by all suggests that success is now attainable.

There is, however, one dark cloud looming over this promising development: it would be a great shame if the Government's brave steps were wasted because of penny-pinching. Development of community forest management will require many resources and some funding. The Government must match its strong support in principle with the financial and logistical support necessary to make this new model work in

practice. In particular, I hope they provide the interim support necessary to those whose livelihoods depends on the forest, as we as a society move to new and sustainable forest management practices."

Chris's letter captures the spirit of the day and the commitment that now exists across the region to see the Community Forest Management work. There have been pressures to see 'something' happen quickly. In CFM models overseas the average time it takes to get to an operational level is around two-years. This community needs time to work through an enormous volume of information and issues.

In the period since the September Workshop, groups of participants have been meeting to design their vision of the CFM Structure. This is another sign of how far the community has progressed, when people are motivated enough to devote time to something positive towards CFM. The question of resourcing has also been a recurrent theme at meetings. There is a small budget to get the CFM process moving that will need regular top-ups to ensure that the process can reach its full potential.

The Community Forest Management is also breaking free of the State Forest boundaries with requests from a geographic section of the region that contains large areas of privately owned adjacent forest, for the State Forest to be considered for inclusion into some of the restoration and biodiversity strategies. Bundled with this proposal has been another phase, involving farm-forestry establishment on previously cleared land that again is strategically integrated into the Wombat CFM ecological planning.

As in other parts of the world, Community Forest Management in the Wombat has every potential of shifting a community from division and conflict over their forest, to commitment and pride.

Let us all hope it is contagious.

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Note: See Appendix A to this paper is located at then end of this Proceedings