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Resolving Conflicts in Forestry
The Wombat Forest, Victoria

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Location and development of the present forest.

The Wombat Forest, situated north west of Melbourne, extends over approximately 70000 hectares along the Great Dividing Range (elevation range 275 to 875 metres), near the townships of Daylesford, Trentham and Macedon. The forests are representative of the stringybark or low elevation mixed species forests with the dominate species being Messmate Stringybark (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) in various associations with either Manna Gum (*E. viminalis*) or Candlebark (*E. rubida*). Narrow-leaved Peppermint (E. radiata) tends to replace Messmate Stringybark-dominated mixtures in drier areas.

In the past the Wombat Forest was much more extensive, but the surrounding areas on predominately volcanic derived soils (either Quaternary, Tertiary or Devonian Ryodacite) were cleared for agriculture leaving the forest on soils derived from predominately Ordovician slates and sandstone. Rainfall varies between 700 and 1100 mm. And combined with high organic matter the soils have a low to moderate erosion hazard, which is important as most of the forest is also managed for domestic and agricultural water production.

Land Use allocation within the Wombat Forest has been considered by the Land Conservation Council (LCC) in its various reports since 1970 over the area and land use categories have been decided by State Parliament (see Table 1).

The area of the Wombat Forest available for sawlog production, excluding areas set aside under the Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production, is approximately 36,000 hectares.

Early utilisation and management

The Wombat Forest was heavily exploited during the latter part of the 1800s, and most of the mature forest of today is the result of natural regeneration from that period. The species composition of the mature forest is predominately Messmate Stringybark with gum and peppermint species being less frequent. The species composition has been manipulated since the early 1920s, by thinning operations to favor Messmate Stringybark over time, the original species composition is unknown.

The discovery of gold near Clunes in 1851 saw the beginning of a series of major gold discoveries in Central Victoria, around what is now Ballarat, Creswick, Bendigo, Maryborough, Castlemaine and Daylesford. Timber and fuel to support the mines and towns was obtained from the apparently limitless nearby forests, leading to the rapid and uncontrolled exploitation of these forests. In 1865 a Victorian Parliamentary inquiry recommended that large forested areas in west and central Victoria (including the Wombat and Mount Macedon forests) be reserved as State Forest (Ligar et al 1865). A sequent Royal Commission reported in 1898 that continued over-cutting had led to the scarcity of timber in the Wombat forest, recommending that the annual timber harvest be kept well within the productive capacity (Anon 1901) by the progressive

introduction of controls and regulations and the commencement of broadacre improvement fellings in the Wombat Forest (Mackay 1909)

Annual yields of sawlogs from the Wombat Forest declined from approximately 180 000 cubic metres in the 1870s to 13 350 cubic metres by 1898 (Anon 1899), to insignificant volumes in 1914 (Mackay 1914) until the late 1930s. The current annual yield is approximately 55 000 cubic metres.

The main silviculture practised in the Wombat Forest has involved partial cutting systems varying from single tree selection to the present shelterwood silvicultural system. The shelterwood silvicultural system was introduced in 1973 to concentrate growth on the better Class 1 trees and permit the establishment of seedling regeneration by reducing the overwood basal area from approximately 25 square metres per hectare to 10 square metres per hectare. Where the system has been applied according to the prescriptions, adequate regeneration has occurred. It has been assumed that the retained Class 1 trees respond to the reduction in competition following the initial shelterwood harvest; further research is required to quantify this response.

Where the silvicultural prescriptions have not been met in relation to retained overwood, there is evidence that where the residual basal area exceeds 12 square metres per hectare the composition of the regenerating stratum favors the peppermint species at the expense of Messmate Stringybark which is the preferred sawlog species. The long term impact on this shift in species composition on sustainable wood production is unknown, though there is scope to manipulate species composition by paying more attention to flowering patterns and species-mix of the retained overwood.

The change from selection to shelterwood silviculture also resulted in the abandonment of a series of Continuous Forest Inventory plots, without which accurate measurement of overwood increment cannot be determined, especially in the period following the initial shelterwood harvest. These plots are now being re-established, together with additional plots and when combined with a complete resource data base should provide definitive information to quantify forest growth.

Objectives of forest management in the Wombat Forest

The following objectives, described from those outlined in the harvesting and regeneration plans for the Wombat Forest (Harris 1976), have been pursued following the introduction of the Shelterwood Silvicultural System. Current management objectives are under review as part of the Midlands Forest Management Plan due for release for public comment in November 1995.

The forest management objectives to the present time have been:

- The sustainable economic and long-term production of hardwood sawlogs, pulpwood and other timber products of suitable quality. Within this objectives silvicultural practices must be consistent with sound ecological and cost-effective management:
- The management of water supply so as to adequately protect the quality and quantity of the water drawn from the forest, and the maintenance of soil stability
- The protection of the forest from fire and other damaging agencies, and the protection from fire of adjoining public and private lands:
- The conservation of landscape, wildlife habitat and flora:
- The provision of opportunities and facilities for forest recreation and public forestry education:
- The supply of non timber forest produce (e.g. honey, gravel)

While these objectives may be somewhat refined in the Midlands Forest <Management Plan, their general direction is unlikely to be altered as the major products being harvested from

the forest are sawlogs to local sawmills, pulpwood to CSR (for processing in Bacchus Marsh) and Midway Wood Products (for export through Geelong) and firewood for domestic consumption.

Community response to forest management

The Wombat Forest has had a long history of timber utilisation. However, until recently community concern over forest management has been largely confined to a period of protest over the conversion of native forest stands to Radiata Pine plantations during the 1970s. Some concern was expressed over the introduction of the shelterwood silvicultural system in the early 1970s, mainly by timber workers resisting the change to long-practised harvesting systems. Timber production activities in the forest, including a long standing supply of pulpwood for domestic processing have failed to attract the attention of the major conservation groups which have focussed their Victorian campaigns on the forests of East Gippsland and more recently the Mountain Ash forests of the central Victorian highlands.

After a long period of little community concern the Wombat Forest Society (WFS) has emerged as a major critic of current forest management practices. This group formed in early 1994 with a major community and media campaign calling for a judicial inquiry into forest management. The WFS annual report claims a membership in 250, but the most vocal of the group are predominately a mixture of semi-professional forest campaigners, alternative lifestyle adherents and retired timber workers. This mix of new greens and old timber workers is a distinctive feature of the WFS which it has exploited in its media campaign to gain credibility for its position.

The basic stated position of the WFS is as follows:

- Maintenance of a viable timber industry
- A cessation of export woodchip utilisation from the forest
- Use of selection silvicultural systems
- Increased emphasis on ecotourism
- Improved protection of flora and fauna
- Improved protection of water quality

The WFS, or at least the major activists, are evidently aligned with the Wilderness Society but its stated support for maintenance of the timber industry is inconsistent with the Wilderness Society and more recently, the Australian Conservation Foundation. It appears likely that this position is aimed at broadening its support base among disaffected timber workers who evidently maintain a 20-year objection to the introduction of the shelterwood system. Support for the WFS campaign from the major conservation groups has been limited and it is firmly opposed by the main stream timber industry.

Features of the WFS campaign have included letterbox drops, and poster campaigns around Daylesford, active and effective use of the local media, courting of other community groups and local government for support, large scale Freedom of Information requests, and repetitive and anonymous requests for information and opinion from various CNR staff. For a period it actively courted support from the timber workers but this has been markedly unsuccessful and met trenchant opposition from the Construction Forestry Mining and Engineering Union. The groups campaign was largely focussed on the Federal Government's process of issuing of export woodchip licenses. The Federal Government did not recognise any of the coupes listed for harvesting in the Wombat Forest to have high conservation value, and that old growth forest was absent. Since this issue has been resolved in the short term the WFS campaign has abated to a relatively low level.

The general content of the WFS campaign is probably familiar to forest managers throughout Australia. While their have been some genuine concerns expressed about the management of the forest, the WFS has also included a combination of distorted and selectively presented facts; exaggeration of forest management problems; creation and promotion of community misunderstandings; questioning the integrity of CNR forestry staff; self-contradictions in its arguments; and the use of pseudo-scientific analysis to justify ots campaigning position.

Commonwealth government involvement

The issue of an export woodchip licence to Midway Wood Products provided a major focus for the WFS campaign during the latter part of 1994. In this campaign it gained significant support from the local federal Labor MHR the Hon. Neil O'Keefe. Mr. O'Keefe actively and publicly backed the WFS campaign - his support include appearances an the 7:30 Report in which he criticised CNR management of the forest, and facilitation of WFS access to the Minister for Environment, Senator Faulkner. The Senator inspected the forest with the WFS during the course of the campaign. All Wombat Forest coupes were included in Senator Faulkner's now famous list, on the basis of the impact timber harvesting would have on catchment values. None have been subject to federal sanction in the issue of the export woodchip licence to Midway Wood Products.

Response by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

CNR was slow to respond to WFS. The rapid growth in profile of the group and its related effective use of the media caught the Department off guard. Since overcoming this slow start, CNR's response has been multi-faceted. Key aspects have been:

- Active involvement of media liaison staff with experience in forest campaigns, who have been able to provide a steady flow of high quality, professionally presented material to the media;
- Ready availability of senior regional and head office forest staff for media interviews and briefings - this is important if a media tendency to develop conspiracy theories is to be avoided
- Briefings of State and Federal MP's and candidates (from both major parties) to ensure parliamentary processes are based on sufficient and accurate information
- The conduct of a public meeting in Daylesford, addressed by the Director of Forest Service and other senior forests staff which enabled approximately 150 people to raise concerns they may have (the WFS boycotted this meeting).
- Production of a review of the shelterwood silviculture system and other technical data
- Production of information leaflets explaining CNR's forest management objectives and processes
- Forest tours for major stakeholders - a group targeted with considerable effect has been the old forest workers who objected with the shelterwood system and had aligned themselves with the WFS. CNR's efforts at explaining its position to this group appears to have resulted in a tempering of opposition.

CNR's organised approach appears to have gained a measure of community support while the profile of the WFS appears to have waned, at least temporarily.

The Midlands Forest Management Plan

The Victorian *Timber Industry Strategy*, released in 1986, reformed forest management planning in Victoria. The *Strategy* requires the preparation of Forest Management Plans which must be ensure forest management is environmentally sensitive, sustainable and economically viable and that planning include opportunities for public input. Work began on the Midlands Forest Management Plan (which includes the Wombat Forest) in 1992. A draft plan is due for release later this year. The Plan addresses all forest management issues, in particular, timber production, flora and fauna conservation, water quality and recreation and tourism. It will ensure forest management in the FMA remains within the *National Forest Policy* statement.

The development of the plan has coincided with the WFS campaign. It has provided an additional opportunity for CNR to address public concerns, and demonstrate the commitment of CNR and the planning team to community involvement in plan development. Nevertheless the WFS has rejected several opportunities and invitations to raise its concerns within the planning framework. It has recently announced that it will prepare an alternative forest management plan with its own limited resources and experience.

CNR has formed a local Forest Management Advisory Committee to provide a focus for public participation in the development of the plan. The committee is chaired by Assoc. Professor Martin Westbrooke of the University of Ballarat and comprises members drawn from a wide variety of industry and community backgrounds. The committee's major roles are to advise forest planning staff of issues of community concern, to advise on public consultation processes, to provide feedback on draft planning proposals and to maintain networks within their local community. The committee has met 15 times during the course of the plan's development. The WFS has addressed the committee on two occasions. On both occasions WFS representatives attacked the credibility and representativeness of committee members. The committee, while accepting that the WFS is raising legitimate issues for debate rejected WFS tactics and conclusions. The advisory committee has proven to be an effective forum assisting CNR's commitment to consultation and providing a useful sounding board for alternative management strategies.

Towards resolution

The WFS campaign has had some positive aspects. It has heightened community awareness of the environmental and economic values of the Wombat Forest. It has also raised the profile of the forest within CNR attracting additional assessment and planning resources and a commitment to additional resources for on ground works. The regional timber industry has been shaken out of any complacency it may have developed; the performance of logging contractors has improved and licensees have become aware that their future in native forests is tied to their acceptance of the legitimacy of genuine multiple-objective forest management.

An important test for CNR's credibility and capacity as a forest manager will be the release of the Midlands Forest Management Plan later this year. CNR's task is to convince the general community, the timber industry and special interest groups such as WFS that it has adequately addressed the major forest management issues. No doubt the WFS also recognises the significance of this document as previously noted, it has already attacked the process and the FMA Advisory committee. Release of the plan is likely to provide a focus for a renewed WFS campaign.

CNR forest planners have recognised the need to actively promote the Forest Management Plan in the community. A series of media and community activities are currently in the planning stage. Public comment will be invited on the proposed plan but ironically the vituperative nature

of the WFS campaign has created an atmosphere which inhibits rather than enhances opportunities for community consultation.

Sources

Hepburn Advocate (incorporating the Daylesford Advocate and the Creswick Advertiser), the Ballarat Courier, the Age, the Midland Express, WFS Fact Sheet, CNR Publications, Land Conservation Council reports covering the Wombat Forest

Further reading

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