1998

Key Meetings, Moments and Moves.

(The Campaign for the Wombat since the Export Woodchip Ban.)

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The end of 1995 saw the cancellation of Midway Wood Products export woodchip license from the Wombat Forest. The Wombat was not included in the Deferred Forest Areas , nor was it ever likely to, the DFA process had a set of criteria that clearly never would have included a regrowth forest like the Wombat. The DFA process was an interim step to preserve pristine forests that may be subject to logging and woodchipping. The last Wombat Forest Guardian contained a flow chart that described getting the DFA as the 'high road' and the 'low road' if the Wombat did not receive DFA Listing. It was unfortunate that the author of this article did not seem to understand the whole DFA/RFA Process (Regional Forest Agreements). A reading of the draft criteria for this process would have made this apparent.

Other members of the Wombat Forest Society had spent the preceding year establishing a rapport with key Federal Politicians and Beurocrats and understood what would be necessary to a. have Midway removed from the Wombat.

and b. Have the full RFA fastracked.

The RFA Process will be carried out in this region next year and will examine ALL the values that are attached to the forest regions of the area. The beauty of this process is that it gives all players the chance to have an input on what they see as the issues and values involved. The Forest Task Force (attached to the Prime Minister's Department) will carry out this process and being a Federal Agency have not the direct vested interest that the Department of Natural Resources and Environment in Victoria have. Myself and Loris Duclos have had a briefing with the Task Force whilst in Canberra a month ago and have great confidence in the independence of the people and their commitment to the process.

With the current round of lobbying from the Forestry Division of the Construction, Mining , Forestry and Energy Union (CMFEU) and particularly Michael O'Connor for a return we are seeing an uninformed and misrepresentational exercise aimed at seeing Midway's allowed back into the Wombat. The line that the Union is running is centered around claims of job losses due to Midway's expulsion, and that the burnt logs that the Union are parading around are the waste that Midway's could have taken. What Mr O'Connor fails to point out is the 17% cut in the Sustainable Sawlog Quota made at the end of last year due to mis-management by the then DCNR. Nor does he mention that the Wombat Forest is closed to logging this winter in order to look after the other values of the forest. Even if Midways got their license back today the workers would still be out of work until the forest opens in spring. It is worth noting that historically logging has been a seasonal job with timber workers farming etc as income over winter. Mr O'Connor also fails to mention the fact that his Union Elections are coming up and is the Wombat a profile raising effort for his own job? Roomer also has it that Mr O'Connor is known to visit Malchom McDougal's(Managing Director of Midways) Jan Juc beach house on invitation. Who is O'Connor really looking after the Workers or his Corporate Mates? It is a shame that when you talk to Mr O'Connor about the Wombat and Sustainability and the mismanagement and the questionable Shelterwood System and the impact it is having on other values and other jobs , Mr O'Connor's stock reply is that he doesn't know anything about forestry etc, maybe he needs to do some study on the topic before he opens his mouth, perhaps if he knew more

about what he was talking about he may see that by pressuring to get his mates back into the Wombat he may be jepodising the whole future of the Timber Industry in the forest. It is a bad time for the sawmills with the down turn in the building industry at the moment meaning that their are huge stockpiles of logs in most sawmill yards at present. Is alot of the present campaign based on getting some cashflow for the operators that have shares in Midways by selling the woodchips to Japan? The State Forests must be run as sawlog driven operations and not pulp driven.

The line that is often used by the timber industry is asking why would we chip good sawlogs when we get more for sawn timber than woodchips? The answer is that it is far more profitable to chip logs than mill them. Midways pay around $25 a ton at the gate for logs. Out of this the faller ,the skidder, the grader and the loader . the truck driver and the government royalty are paid. It takes about ten to fifteen minutes to chip the twenty ton load of logs. Midways get around $75 a ton for chip when they sell them, i.e. they pay $500 for the load at the gate and with fifteen minutes work for one person they get $1,500 ($1,000 profit).

If the logs go to a sawmill the mill pays more for the logs in royalty , they have to unloaded, stacked in the log yard, kept wet to stop splitting, be picked up and put through the ripping bench, moved, put through the breaking down saw to be sawn to size, graded and marked, stacked in the yard and stored until it is sold, many hands and many operations for the $300 to $400 out the end. Of course its more profitable to chip them, especially at times of down turn in the building industry.

The recent loggers blockade in Canberra organised by Mr O'Connor with Wombat Workers saw only about six workers and their families , with most workers not interested in going. Poor old Michael was then forced to run media calling the action a "token Protest", to most eyes it was a failure. The burnt logs that the Union displayed on the trucks as good logs burnt that could have gone to Midway's must have come from coupes that Midway's did have access to as the DNRE don't burn the coupes for around eighteen months after logging. The REAL question the Union should be asking is " Why didn't Midways take these logs when they only took around one third of their license quota?" We don't need opportunist operators in the Wombat. If we are to have a second user of the waste they must be made to clean up the coupes completely not just take what suites their greedy hip pockets.

A major concern is the rumour that it is likely that the present State Government has an agenda of Corporatisation and then Privtisation for the State Forests. Already we have seen the Department of Natural Resources and Environment significantly downsized over the last few years to the point that it hasn't the staffing numbers to do its job properly. It is believed that the amount of State Forest that sawmills etc will be allowed to buy will be proportionate to the size of their license. Could the real agenda by sections of the timber industry who have significant interests in Midways be trying to get Midways back into the Wombat in order to be able to bid for much larger parts of the Wombat. It made no sense two years ago when Midways had their export woodchip license increased from 47,000 tons p.a. to 64,000 tons p.a., at the same time the local logging consortium was telling our community that Midways only took 20,000tons p.a. It makes sense if seen in light of potential up coming Privatisation.

The people of Victoria must ask if corporatisation/privatisation is on the agenda? Do we want it? How are all the other legitimate values of the forest to be looked after? Do we loose right of access? With the corperatisation of the State's softwoods a few years ago , there are roads in the Creswick area that the public can no

longer use, will this be the case in our native forest? Who will we buy firewood permits from, Midways? Who will be responsible for fire control? Who will look after the catchment values? Who will look after and be responsible for the Flora and Fauna?

With the agenda for privatisation of the States Regional Water Authorities coming up and the rumours of the Forests doing the same it would seem that there is a conflict of interest. With most of the Wombat gazetted catchments the potential buyer of the water Authorities would expect a high standard of catchment control and management to ensure their supply and quality water. On the other hand the potential buyers of the forests for timber would expect to be able to manage them to optimise their interests. The end result may be an Economic Rationalist approach of valuing the potential value of the timber , at present two cuts per eighty years, with the water, harvested yearly, and supplying both domestic, industrial and agricultural interests. Ballarat's main limiting factor has been identified as the availability of water and the south flowing catchments from the Wombat will supply the western growth corridor of Melbourne.

The WFS believes that the responsible thing for the Timber Industry to do at present is not to put pressure on the Federal Government for an immediate re-issuing of Midway's export woodchip license but to show that they are responsible users of a public asset and wait until the RFA process has examined and quantified ALL the regions values and we will then have a clearer picture of where we stand.

The question of susutainability is far from settled. Both the timber industry , timber workers and the WFS have serious doubts with the revised sawlog yield, it would seem that until this question is satisfactorily resolved it is ridiculous for Industry and the Union to be focussed on Midways.

The WFS has had two meetings this year with DNRE who have bought along the experts that have compiled the new sustaiability figures. The WFS has an open policy with DNRE that when and if it can show us numbers and models that show beyond reasonable doubt that its figures are correct, we will publicly say so. The second of the meetings we had involved Bob Graham Senior Forrester South West Region DNRE who arranged for Bruce Kilgour and Michael Sutton , who are the main number crunchers for the new figures. The WFS asked Pat Connor , a local resident and engineer to come along as a independent participant to look at the modelling and numbers. We went into this meeting with an open mind and listened to the methodology and numbers . We were especially interested to see how the other values were being accommodated and how the forest will look ten, twenty and more years from now. A number of very impressive overhead slides were shown and cutting regimes projected. It was explained that the DNRE team had used satellite images maps and records to revise the sawlog yield. These people did not visit the Wombat to check calibrations used for analysis and it was apparent that the non-timber values have not been adequately taken into account.

In terms of sustainability the figures and reality simply do not add up. The best that we can expect is around thirty years before we've cut out the forest. In terms of water and catchment implications for the future the damage is already done and the strategy for flora and Fauna is prothetic and is a token effort that will not guarantee future generation's access to what is present today.

Pat Connor summed it up with this statement "The system is cruel. To be optimistic, allowing for the doubtful success of shelterwood, it is stripping the forest to create young regrowth stands, at the expense of other non-timber values (Tourism, Mineral Water, Catchment water quality and yield, Bio-diversity)."

THIS IS GROSS MISMANAGEMENT OF A PUBLIC RESOURCE. ARE WE WITNESSING ASSET STRIPPING PRIOR TO PRIVATISATION AND HANG THE CONSEQUENCES?

The new Minister for Natural Resources and the Environment is Marie Teehan. Mrs Teehan recently visited the region and spent extensive time with the timber industry as sections of it hawked its self interest. Mrs Teehan invited the WFS to meet with her. We met Mrs Teehan and local Liberal State Members of parliament. In this meeting we presented Mrs Teehan and the other Members copies of our submission for the Midlands Forest Management plan. A round table presentation was given outlining our concerns over the state of the Wombat and the blinkered management that seems to cater for timber to the detriment of other legitimate values. The WFS Committee plans to follow up this meeting with others when some on going research we are carrying out is completed.

So what is the future for the Wombat Forest Society and the Wombat forest? My gut feeling is that the Federal Government will re-issue Midways license. It will be done because between the Union and the Timber Industry their combined lobbying dollar far exceeds ours. We have put forward the best case for holding off on the License until after the RFA process, but countless trips by Industry and the Union will mean that the Pollies and advisers will have had a good ear bashing.

Our strategy is to keep working towards getting our research together for the RFA process . Industry will have to face the facts that we have presented them with enough research to show some BIG question marks with most management aspects of the Wombat. If Industry want to jack boot Midways back into the Wombat knowing that something is still wrong then these people must also be prepared to face Legal Action possibly in the form of Class Actions bought about by other people that rely on the Wombat for some of the other values that have ,are, and clearly will be effected by the out of date blinkered approach by sections of the Timber Industry. The Wombat Forest is a publicly owned asset (for now) and as such no one user has the right to adversely effect another's right to the forest or products from the forest (i.e. water.).

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the new Committee for the dedication that they have shown and the initiative they've displayed , well done. And a big thanks to Loris Duclos who's committment and drive must make her one of the most effective 'Environmemtalists ' in Victoria.