# What factors drove the formation of the Wombat Forest Society and what enabled it to claim to be unusual if not unique in the forest conservation movement?

Emma Paulding
131 789

The Wombat Forest has supplied the domestic timber needs of the surrounding communities for over 170 years. Throughout its history, the forest has been exploited for its various values and uses and undergone a turbulent cycle of devastation, restoration, and then repeated devastation. During the most recent cycle of devastation, local community members joined forces to stop unsustainable forest management and succeeded in changing the fate of the Wombat Forest, and the future direction of forest management in Victoria.[1] Changes in government policy which promoted industrial extraction of wood resources and the removal of job security for logging contractors paved the path for the formation of the Wombat Forest Society (WFS). The WFS was deemed unique in that it encompassed traditional forest activists as well as respected 'old time' locals who had worked in the timber industry all their lives. Unlike other forest campaigns at the time, the WFS recognised the importance of the Wombat Forest as a native wood resource and argued primarily for the implementation of sustainable practices and not for an end to logging. The WFS was also unusual in that it found support from a large proportion of the community representing a range of different values. This directed the campaign towards the establishment of 'evidence' in support of their arguments which enhanced their creditability to many government officials and decision makers.

## Setting the scene: Management of the Wombat Forest 1851-1993

The Wombat Forest is located 80km north west of Melbourne and covers approximately 70,000 hectares[2] around the townships of Daylesford and Trentham. The forest is a mixed species dry Eucalypt forest dominated by messmate (*E. obliqua*) that has arisen on a unique geological formation at the south west tip of the Great Dividing Range. The rich volcanic soils are interspersed between poorer Ordovician sediments, and the current boundaries of the

[1] Through the trial project: "Community Forest Management of the Wombat State Forest" and changes to public consultation processes.

[2] Department of Sustainability and Environment. Wombat State Forest. www.dse.vic.gov.au

forest reflect the boundary between the rich soils cleared for agriculture, and the poorer soils retained as forest. The Wombat Forest is an important water supply catchment for Central and Western Victoria and supplies the headwaters for the Werribee, Campaspe, Mooroobool, Marybinong and Loddon River systems.

The discovery of gold in nearby Clunes in 1851, led to a rapid increase in the population of Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine and Daylesford. Timber from the forest was seen as an endless source and heavily exploited to meet the timber and fuel demands of the mining industry and the growing communities. The more productive areas of land were cleared and established for farming to supply produce to Melbourne and the Goldfields and to meet the food requirements of the growing region. Clearing and timber cutting was unregulated and it was "*the situation of everyman for himself that applied to the Wombat*"[3]. Streams were diverted and channelled to aid mining practices and banks were cleared and heavily eroded in search of gold, leading to alterations in the natural hydrological cycle.

Along with the discovery of gold in the region, the early miners opened up access to the mineral springs in Hepburn, to the delight of the Melbourne holiday maker. Mineral water was well known for its therapeutic value and became a popular destination for relaxation and health therapies during the late 1800's.[4] The first mineral spring reserves were declared in 1868, and were among some of the first nature reserves in Victoria. The value of the mineral springs to the early community became evident when the water pumped from the deep gold mines began to compromise the aquifer which fed the mineral springs. The argument for the longer term community benefits over the short term gain of private individuals prevailed and the decision "*was firmly set by our forbears, where there is a clash of interests, the mineral springs come first*."[5]

Towards the end of the 19th century timber resources in the forest were becoming scarce. A Royal Commission into the state of Victorian forests in 1899 declared the Wombat "*a ruined forest*"[6] and recommended the introduction of control and regulations in forest management. Timber harvesting became incidental in the early 1900's and was primarily aimed at improving the quality of the growing trees for future saw log supplies. An assessment of the forest in 1933 revealed the forest to be in a "*favourable condition*" with the "*development and*

[3] Haughton, Norm. *Timber and Gold*. 1980.

[4] Same as some one some where.

[5] Victorian Mineral Water Committee. *Mineral Springs of Victoria, Taking the Waters.* 199?.

[6] Royal Commission. 1899

*density of the stands on the best sites truly remarkable*."[7] The underlying aim at this time was the "*building up of the growing stock… [in] areas capable of producing high quality products*"[8].

Small scale wood extraction continued until the post World War II housing boom enticed the government to reopen the Wombat for commercial timber production to supply soldier settlements and war service housing estates in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The forest officers during the 1950's recognised that there was a lack of knowledge and research in eucalypt silviculture, *"Victorian forestry (indeed Australian forestry) at that stage had a scant knowledge of Eucalypt silviculture,"*[9] and opted for a low impact system that retained the best trees for future supply. By the late 1960's the lack of regeneration within the forest prompted a governmental report into the best methods to extract timber whilst promoting regeneration of the desired species. The report recommended guidelines for the use of a variety of systems to accommodate the differences between forest types, including clear felling and uneven aged selection. This was the first intensification of logging in the Wombat Forest since timber extraction was reduced to incidental amounts following the Royal Commission in 1899.

By the early 70's, conservation groups in Australia were becoming more active over logging in native forests and opposition to the destruction of native forests for pine plantations was also growing.[10] In 1974 a proposal by the Land Conservation Council to clear areas of the Wombat for pine plantations was met by anger from many members of the community. The first environmental campaign in the Wombat Forest was fought. Members of the local community formed the 'Save our Bushland Action Group' in 1975 and were successful in significantly reducing the area of native forest in the Wombat planned for conversion to pine plantaions. In 1973, the book "The Fight for the Forests"[11] (TFFTF) provided forest campaigners with alternatives to industrial logging, and took the first in depth look at the impacts of intensive forestry in Australia. The book was pivotal in empowering activists with knowledge of the wood chip industry and provided evidence for arguments against intensive logging. Barry Golding has been an important activist in the Ballarat region for over 30 years

[7] Forest Commission of Victoria. *Ballarat and Creswick Working Plan*. 1933.

[8] Forest Commission of Victoria, 1933.

[9] N. D, Endocott. Forest Officer of Wombat Forest during the 1960's and 1970's in *The Silviculture Future of the Wombat Forest*. 1995

[10] Ian Penna. 2004. "*The fight for the Forests" as a forest Portal*.

[11] Routley, R., and V. Routley. *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry*. First ed. 1972

and was involved in the 'Save Our Bushland Action Group' from its beginnings, he recently commented on the importance of TFFTF to the first forest campaigns in the Wombat.

> *"It provided people struggling at grass roots in forest towns with irrefutable evidence that even from an economic perspective, what was happening was neither economically rational nor ethically sound. It galvanised action. In the case of the removal of native forest for pines in the Daylesford area, the arguments in (TFFTF) provided critical evidence from elsewhere in Australia that this was far from a local battle."*[12]

At the same time, the Eden wood chip mill had become the focus of media attention. Pitched to the community as an important resource to the economy of Australia that would "*improve the environment*",[13] many people felt tricked by the full sale of the mill to Japanese investors only 18 months after operations began. The Japanese involvement in WWII was still in the memories of many older Australians[14] and throughout the 1970's interest in an Australian owned export wood chip mill was circulated throughout the timber industry. Midway woodchip export mill opened in Geelong during the early 1980's and took small volumes of residual wood from operations in the Otways. Waste wood from the Wombat Forest went to CSR, a local particle board company in Bacchus Marsh that had been operating since the 1960's and provided an important source of local employment. Global demand for hardwood chips increased significantly throughout the decade due to innovation within the paper industry, providing large markets for residual wood products. New harvesting machines were also beginning to be introduced as technology and occupational health and safety became more important. Machine harvesting favoured clear felling and resulted in higher volumes of waste wood created.

Changing community awareness and expectations regarding forestry practices was seen across Australia in campaigns such as OREN (Otways Regional Environment Network during the mid to late 1990's) and NEFA (North-East [NSW] Forest Alliance) which challenged the integrity and faith in forestry management. The Victorian government responded by introducing legislation through the Timber Industry Strategy (TIS) in 1986 and the Code of Forest Practice in 1987. The Timber Industry Strategy introduced environmental standards in timber operations and promoted economic efficiencies within the industry. It also provided economic rationalism for the use of residual wood for pulp products and supported the growth

[12] Ian Penna. "*The Fight for the Forests" as a forest portal.* 2003.

[13] Forestry Commission of NSW. *The Eden forest industries: some background notes*1972.

[14] Adrian Bennett. WWII veteran. Pers comm.

of the Australian owned export wood chip mill at Geelong. New regionally based sustainable yield volumes were calculated and the Wombat State Forest became part of the Midlands Forest Management Area. From the calculated wood volumes, licences for sawlogs and residual wood (pulpwood) were issued according to the saw miller's capacity to value add the timber. This favoured larger saw mills with high capital investment and implied a guaranteed supply of wood from the forest.

In conjunction with a change in wood allocation, the aim for economic efficiencies by the government introduced forest syndication of the contract workforce. Traditionally, logging contractors where employed directly through the saw mill and strong relationships built up between the two parties. The introduction of syndication put the logging contracts up for tender, at first under the control of the state department and subsequently under the control of the Midlands Harvesting Group, formed by a consortium of saw mill owners. No consultation was initially undertaken by the department and local workers only became aware of the situation after a state wide advertisement for logging contractors was placed in local papers and the Melbourne *Age*.[15] The local loggers formed the 'Wombat Integrated Logging Association' in 1990 in response to the threat they felt was imposed on their jobs. They argued that syndication forced the local loggers to upgrade to expensive equipment and enter into large debts without the reassurance of guaranteed employment and said "*it is shameful of the department to throw our jobs open to tender*".[16]

Malcolm McDougal was the regional manager for the state Department of Conservation and Environment in the Midlands/Geelong region until 1990, and was instrumental in the introduction of forest syndication and intensification of logging in Western Victoria. In 1991 he became the company manager for the Midway wood chip mill in Geelong. This was seen by local environmentalists as "*bordering on corruption, when a senior man in a state agency sets up a system, then takes the job as the manager of the company that profits*".[17] The closeness of the Otways and the Wombat Forests to Midways export facilities enabled wood bought from these locations to offset the higher cost of acquiring extra wood from east of Melbourne. This placed increased pressure on the Wombat Forest to supply larger volumes as the reduced cost of transportation enabled greater profits to be made. Midways export licence for an annual volume of wood chips was increased from 80,000$m^3$ in the first year of

[15] Alexander, J. 1990. *The Ballarat Courier* 29 May 1990.

[16] George Howard *in* Alexander, J., 1990. *The Ballarat Courier*

[17] Loris Duclos. Pers comm..

operation to 179,000m$^3$ in 1989 and to 300,000m$^3$ of wood chips in 1994.[18] Small saw mills and forest loggers saw the threat posed by the intensification to industrial style logging and began to question the objectives of forest managers. Bill McCashney, a retired forest worker and champion axeman, could see the change in management from his early years, "*in those days the area's timber industry was built on sawlogs. Not any more. Now more and more of the forest is being taken out for wood chips*".[19]

After the introduction of the Timber Industry Strategy by the Caine labour government, with Joan Kirner as minister for Forests, the volume of wood extracted across Victoria and within the Wombat forest progressively fell towards the sustainable yield targets set by the TIS.[20] A significant over estimation in the sustainable yield calculations due to simplistic models and inaccurate data was later highlighted by local activists during the forest campaigns, yet it was some time before this claim was vindicated by the government.[21] In 1992 the liberal Kennett government won the state election and intensification of wood extraction in the Wombat Forest began immediately. The increased intensification felt under the Kennett government is clearly evident in the volume figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.[22] The forest that had been nurtured back from a "*ruined forest*"[23] to something "*remarkable*"[24] was again facing the threat of (un)controlled exploitation.

The formation of the Wombat Forest Society

During the early 1990's, the department responsible for the management of the Wombat Forest was inundated with phonecalls, letters and questions from the community. In response to this, the government established a Wombat Forest Consultative Committee to streamline the public concern. The committee was open for involvement from interested people and representation from different values and interests within the community was ensured through an election of members at a public meeting. Twelve months into the consultative process the department withdrew their support for the committee without formal notice and the consultation ended ("*it appeared to be due to the increased complexity and technicality of*

[18] Anon. "New Company Chips In" in *The Weekly Times*. 5th October 1994.

[19] Bill McCahney *in* Kelly, H. 1994. *The Age*

[20] Publicly available annual wood volume figures from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Daylesford office. This statement referred to the years 1987-1996.

[21] Loris Duclos. President of the Wombat Forest Society 1994-2005. Pers comm.

[22] Loris Duclos. Pers comm.

[23] Royal Commission. 1899

[24] Forestry Commission of Victoria, 1933.

*questions presented"*[25]). The department then established a new community committee by selection, without consulting any previous members from the original consultation process. This ostracised and offended many people who had a long history of interest and involvement in the Wombat Forest, fuelling resentment and the assumption that the department had a set agenda.

Through the Wombat Forest consultative committee and the networks that developed, local environmentalist Tim Anderson had befriended concerned a number of loggers, including Bill McCaughney and George Howard who had both lived and worked in the Wombat for more than 100 years combined. (delete-They arranged, note George Howard was not involved in the start of WFS) An informal meeting with a number of timber workers from old established families, conservationists including Tim Anderson and prominent activists Alan Gray[26] to discuss the departments unwillingness to continue with consultation and to look at strategies to address the unsustainable logging in the Wombat Forest. Tim Anderson recalls the first meeting;

> *"Most of the timber families were saying it* [current harvest rates] *was unsustainable, but the department kept saying no, the numbers say it is sustainable. Then they* [the timber families] *said 'They're killing our forests can you help us save it?'."*[27]

From this plea, a formal meeting for the beginning of the Wombat Forest Society was decided upon.

In February 1994 the Wombat Forest Society (WFS) came into effect. The strength of the support from the old established families and local residents saw membership into the society swell to 300 in the first 3 months, and nearly 3000 members and supports by November that year[28]. The integral role played by timber workers in the WFS meant that direct action campaigning was inappropriate as it targeted the 'allies' not the enemies. Instead, attention was directed towards lobbying the decision makers within the state run forests department and the local members of federal parliament. The WFS asked themselves why the department claimed the volume figures were sustainable when they believed they weren't and set about to audit the sustainable yield figures and calculations used by the government.

---

[25] Tim Anderson. Member of the Wombat Forest Consultative Committee. Pers comm..

[26] Alan Gray was the founder of the "Earth Garden Magazine" and had strong links with the Wilderness Society.

[27] Tim Anderson. Pers. Comm.

[28] Tim Anderson. Pers. Comm.

There was a degree of urgency felt by the early campaigners for the Wombat Forest. Predictions for the future of the forest were grim, "*at the current rate of logging and wood chipping there will be no Wombat Forest left by the turn of the century. All that will remain is a collection of burnt-out or poorly-regenerating forest blocks"*[29]. The state department played down concerns that were raised by the community and "*rejected claims of impending annihilation of the Wombat Forest*"[30] claiming the forest still held "*between 40 and 50 years of logs.*"[31] The department also had "*no doubt the Wombat State Forest can continue to produce timber"* and that "*no credible evidence existed to suggest otherwise."*[32] These attitudes were supported by the forest industry with Alan Barker, the chairman of the western section of the Victorian Association of Forest Industries, commenting "*on the available evidence, there is no crisis in the forest – [but] there is a clear need for the department and industry to provide better information to the community."*[33]

The primary aims of the Wombat Forest Society were about "*about ecologically sustainable management of the forest and an end to export wood chipping*."[34] The exporting of wood chips was seen as an export of local jobs, Alan Gray was quoted in the fight against wood chipping, "*what we're on about is keeping jobs in the nine sawmills around the Wombat rather than exporting jobs with woodchips to Japan.*"[35] The impact of intensive management could be seen visually, but the WFS understood the need for 'evidence' to support their claims. Through the Freedom of Information Act the WFS were able to obtain figures relating to wood volumes flowing out of the forest and the area of forest harvested. "*Using simple maths and comparing wood volume estimates with actual volume and area harvested we were able to show the current rate of harvesting was unstainable."*[36] The figures were not enough and more evidence was needed to insight a change. To support the validity of the figures calculated, the WFS purchased at their own expense the latest satellite imagery of the Wombat Forest clearly showing the extent of recent harvesting. The WFS believed this provided

[29] Wombat Forest Society Newletter, March 1994.

[30] Anon. "Department has rejected claims of its critics" in *Ballarat Courier*. 26th October 1994

[31] Dart, Lorisse. "Logging level is okay: Dept." in *Ballarat Courier*. 8th October 1994.

[32] Anon. "Department has rejected claims of its critics" in *Ballarat Courier*. 26th October 1994.

[33] Anon. "Debate has created anxiety in community" in *Ballarat Courier.* 26th October 1994.

[34] Tim Anderson. Pers. Comm.

[35] Alan Gray *in* Torpy, D. *Ballarat Courier*. 15th June 1994.

[36] Tim Anderson. Pers. Comm

damming evidence that the forest was being over exploited, "*the satellite image conclusively proves that unsustainable logging is taking place."*[37]

Opposition to use of native forest for wood chips was growing across Australia and the federal government announced a plan in 1994 to phase out export wood chip licences for native forests by the year 2000. The woodchip debate continued to dominate the environmental media fuelled by an increase in export licence volumes announced by the federal government, despite the announcement to phase out the licences by 2000. Midway manager Malcolm McDougal released a series of newspaper advertisements promoting the environmental benefit of wood chips and the assurance that forests were not cut to meet wood chip demands. In one advertisement he claims "*Midway does not chop down trees to make woodchips. The timber we use to make woodchips is the off-cuts from sawmills and the tops of the trunks that which are too thin or branched to use for anything else."*[38] The WFS were seeing and hearing stories of saw log being sent to Midway through their timber workers contacts and but understood their need for indisputable evidence.

The WFS aimed to join other conservation groups such as the Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation in presenting a plea to the federal government in November of 1994 to cancel or reduce wood chip licence export quotas. Through contacts with the timber workers and log truck drivers supplying wood to Midway the WFS compiled secret video footage of saw logs from the Wombat Forest being 'chipped' at Midways export facility in Geelong. The video showed that lower grade sawlogs of select species were being bought to support the wood chip industry, contradicting claims that only 'waste' wood is used for chip products. The video, the satellite image and the workings on the sustainable yield figures were presented to federal parliament in Canberra in November 1994 with the support of the local Federal Members of Parliament.

The WFS was unsuccessful in their first plea to Federal Parliament in 1994 but continued to gather evidence and lobby Federal MP's in the pursuing year. Over the next 12 months, the WFS took many politicians, scientists and media representatives through the forest to show the impact of logging first hand in a bid to rally support. By now, more than 1/3 of the local community was a member of the WFS showing the high level of support felt for the campaign.[39] Federal Member for Bourke, Neil O'Keefe came behind the WFS in support of

[37] Alan Gray quoted *in* Felstead, D., *Midland Express*. 1994

[38] McDougall, M. *Geelong Advertiser*. 7th May 1994.

[39] Hodgkins, N. "News Extra" in *Macedon Regional News*. 31st May 1995.

the suspension of Midways export licence. The evidence against the forest industry became overwhelming, and when presented to the federal government in again in November 1995 the government halted the Midway export licence. The Wombat Forest Society became the first environment campaign to have an existing wood chip licence revoked.

The Wombat Forest Society was different to other campaigns in the forest protection movement "*as it addressed the issues of 'off reserve' management.*"[40] The campaign was primarily aimed at obtaining transparent and sustainable harvesting practices in the forest and was not focused on the creation conservation reserves which excluded the extraction of wood, as forest movements in the past had been. It also addressed the way in which the forest was managed and called for changes to the silviculture, distribution of forest products and consultation processes. The unique combination of environmental objectives and the desire to sustain the local timber industry allowed this campaign to unite the community and provided the support needed to entice change. The WFS has influenced the movements of other campaigns in Victoria and provided a model for the East Gippsland campaign against intensive logging, which incorporated also aimed to unite the community.

The Wombat Forest Society incorporated similar methodology to the Little Desert Campaign in Victoria during the 1960's. Like the academics and professional people involved in the Little Desert argument, the WFS used rational arguments supported by technical evidence to support their claims. Unlike the Little Desert which was fought in Melbourne, the campaign fought in the Wombat relied upon dedicated individuals within the local community, often without formal qualifications in forestry, to collaborate the evidence in support of their arguments. Many forest protection movements had employed emotive based arguments (Daintree Rainforest, the Big Tree in Tasmania) to gain support from the community, and did not seek to represent the broader range of community values associated with timber workers. The WFS had unprecedented support from the community and did not employ emotional tactics such as protests and forest blockades to raise public concern, but invited the public to meetings and forest tours to discuss rationally the issues with forest management.

[40] Loris Duclos. Pers. Comm.

Post Script: 2005

The Wombat Forest Society is about to fold having served its purpose in the protection of the Wombat Forest. They were vindicated with their early arguments and individual members have received Federal and State recognition for their contribution to 'saving' the Wombat Forest. They achieved a state wide reduction of sustainable yield figures through an independent audit of the figures previously used by the government, which then led to a review of the system used for issuing sawlog and wood chip licences. Increased demand for public information within the Wombat Forest changed the fate of the consultation process that was established under the Regional Forest Agreements leading to a better outcome for the community. In 2002, the Victorian State Government announced a commitment to a consultative Community Forest Management in the Wombat Forest, and is currently working with local community members and stakeholders to establish a form of Collaborative Forest Management. Trial logging of selected trees began in 2004 under the 'approval' of the community and was aimed at restoring the ecological and economic potential of the forest.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Loris Duclos and Tim Anderson for their excellent paper collections on the Wombat Forest and for their help and assistance in understanding the sequence of events.

Explanation

Please note, the word department in the above essay refers to the State run lands department which has undergone many changes in name throughout its history. The current state departments are the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Primary Industries.

Personal Communication

Adrian Bennett. WWII veteran. June 2005.

Karl Liftman. Lecturer, practical skills trainer, University of Melbourne, Creswick. June 2005

Loris Duclos. President of Wombat Forest Society 1994-2005. May, June 2005.

Tim Anderson. Co-founder of WFS, Wombat Forest Community Forest Advisor. June 2005

Primary References

Daylesford Forest District. *South-Western Division Field Conference*. 17th and 18th June, 1968.

Forest Commission of Victoria. *Ballarat and Creswick Working Plan*. 1933

Forestry Commission of NSW. *The Eden forest industries: some background notes.* Fact Sheets. 1972

Fourth Progress Report of the Royal Commission on the State Forests and Timber Reserves. *Wombat Forest: Its Resources Management and Control*. Presented to both houses of Parliamont by His Excellency's Command. Victoria. 1899.

Wombat Forest Society Newsletter. Monthly: 1994 – 2000.

Secondary References

Alexander, Jenny. "Daylesford Loggers Fear Their Jobs." *The Courier*, 29 April 1990.

Anon. "Department has rejected claims of its critics" in *Ballarat Courier*. 26th October 1994

Anon. "New Company Chips In" in *The Weekly Times*. 5th October 1994.

Department of Sustainability and Environment. Wombat State Forest. www.dse.vic.gov.au

Endacott, N. D. *The Silvicultural Future of the Wombat Forest*. Unpublished. 1995.

Felstead, D. "Sky Spy Images Timber Harvest." *Midland Express,* 27 September 1994.

Houghton, Norm. *Timber and Gold. A History of the Saw Mills and Tramways of the Wombat forest, 1855-1940.* Light Railway Research Society of Australia. Melbourne, 1980.

Kelly, Hugo. "A Forester Undergoes a Green Conversion." *The Age*, 19 April 1994

McDougall, M. “Tree Talk: Waste Not, Woodchip” in *Geelong Advertiser*. 7th May 1994.

Penna, Ian. *"The Fight for the Forests" as a forest portal*. Paper presented at ANU on 14 October 2003 to mark the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Fight for the Forests* by Val Plumwood (Routley) and Richard Routley.

Routley, R., and V. Routley. *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry*. 3 ed: Research School of Social Sciences, The Australia National University, 1975.

Torpy, D. “Group fighting to save forest: Sawmill jobs ‘in danger’-claim” in *Ballarat Courier*. 15th June 1994.

Torpy, Dennis. "Wombat Forest Managed Responsibly, says Govt." *The Weekly Times*, 21 September 1994.

Victorian Mineral Water Committee. *Mineral Springs of Victoria Taking the Waters. Factsheets*. 199?