

Working in the timber industry in Western Australia in the 1990s

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Unreviewed contribution

Keywords: woodchip industry, workers, waste, housing, environmental movement, Western Australia

ABSTRACT: The author worked at Deanmill, a small timber settlement near Manjimup in Western Australia. He was concerned that the forest industry was not making an adequate response to threats to its future from the environmental movement. He made proposals for improvement to his employer. His main concerns were over chipping material that could have been used for sawn timber, and the inadequate standard of workers' housing.

1 INTRODUCTION

A history of the timber industry would not be complete without a perspective from an employee within the industry during the environmentally turbulent times, starting from the mid-1980s. I consider myself as an honest, reliable and productive worker. I have had a basic education. Previous to my current employment I was employed by Alcoa at Kwinana for 14 years. I was employed at Deanmill, an old jarrah sawmilling town near Manjimup in Western Australia, from January 1985 until the mid-1990s.

It was a policy at Deanmill to put new starters, some with as little knowledge as I had, to operate the gate that directs wood either to the chipper or to the residue table. It was my very first job there, but as I had never worked with timber before and knew absolutely nothing about the consequences of not doing this job properly, I think I wasted a considerable amount of wood in the few days I was on this job. Mostly, I worked on the mill landing at Deanmill debarking the logs ready to go into the sawmill or into the chipper. I saw what was happening to the logs on a day-by-day basis and became very concerned about the future of the industry and the town.

During this time I wrote to the senior management of the company I worked for (Bunnings which was subsequently taken over by Wesfarmers and is now owned by Gunns) in the hope that they would be able to address some of the concerns confronting the industry. I was worried about the impact of these issues on my fellow workers and the industry in general if they were not confronted. To prepare this paper, I have drawn on the series of letters I wrote between 1990 and 1992. My views and ideas were not very complimentary to the company's management, but I tried to be constructive and endeavoured to support my argument with facts and figures. As I did not have access to accurate figures, my calculations were approximate and on the conservative side.

2 CONSERVATION

I believed that the conservation movement was the biggest threat to the timber industry but that the industry's reaction was inadequate. Probably every second Australian has some conservation interest, but only a few of these people belong to an organisation. The resources of the conservation movement should not be underestimated because they have more dedicated people fighting their cause than any company or any group of companies will ever have. Although the conservation movement has a few radicals, the main threat is the average conservationist who makes his protest at the ballot box. I believed that the conservation movement would grow every year and put pressure on any company that they see as a threat to the environment. It put the company, Bunnings in a rather precarious situation. As it could never beat the movement it had to learn to live with it.

The industry's reaction to the environmental movement was, I believed, inadequate. Although it was planting millions of trees, these were all in monocultures. Moreover, the utilisation of the existing resource was, in my daily experience, poor. I did not think that the employees were treated well enough to make them ambassadors for industry, and the trying to project an image of all conservationists as radical dole bludgers on drugs, chaining themselves to trees was only insulting the intelligence of average Australians. To improve the industry's reaction, I suggested possibly planting some other species besides *Eucalyptus globulus*, emphasising this in public relations and only planting *E. globulus* in areas away from prominent view or behind other species. The most important matter was not to waste timber, as discussed later. Employees could be ambassadors but they needed to have jobs worth fighting for. Lastly, I suggested that the timber industry should project an image of being environmentally friendly, like Alcoa does, by consulting and employing conservationists. It could also develop sites with abundant wildlife throughout the state and open them to the public on Sundays for picnics.

3 WASTAGE

The most serious problem that I saw facing the timber industry was not making the best use of the limited resource that was available. I estimated that making better use of the logs would make useful additions to the company's profits.

The chipper at Deanmill has consumed millions of dollars worth of timber, but an operator's error is instantly untraceable. I saw perfectly good wood disappear into this machine constantly over the period I was employed at Deanmill. For example, one February I stood and watched about \$20 worth of wood on its way to the chipper in 20 minutes. One piece even had the length written on it. This piece should have gone straight to the green chain at the sawmill but somehow didn't. During this time I also saw numerous pieces of wood that had not been cut out fully, go into the chipper. Although there had been improvements, was one dollar per minute of wastage acceptable? Tourists often stand at the chipper and watch. I often wonder what they think.

On night shift significantly more wood is wasted due to the fact that fewer bosses and unknown people are around. Efficient workers do not need a boss to tell them where they are wrong. They will perform their jobs successfully without supervision. When the residue table is blocked, sometimes all wood goes into the chipper without being sorted.

Deanmill cut 80 tonnes of chips per day. I estimated that a 5 per cent reduction—readily achievable by training and vigilance—would have saved \$360,000 per year (at \$400 per tonne) if it had been converted into sawn timber. When you look at the huge piles of woodchips and consider how much has been exported over the years, the losses can be seen to have been very considerable. I have heard that the results of subsequent trials indicate a minimum of 15 per cent of prime timber was wasted rather than the 5 per cent I used in my estimates. I estimated that a similar approach to the production of 15 tonnes per day of firewood would save \$135,000 per year, based on an easily attainable 10 per cent reduction. Improving the percentage recovery in the sawmill would also have contributed to better use of the resource and been profitable. I put forward a number of ways that I

thought wastage could be reduced, based on closer inspection, more accurate marking, altered specifications and so forth.

4 EMPLOYEES AS AMBASSADORS

I suggested that the employees could be ambassadors for the industry in relation to the environmental movement. However, when I worked at Deanmill there were significant difficulties in achieving this. The quality of the personnel left a lot to be desired, absenteeism and employee turnover was high, and morale was low. Reliable, productive employees were hard to obtain and difficult to keep. I did not know any employee at Deanmill who was happy with his job or the company. I could not recommend anyone to work for it and I did not feel proud of working for Bunnings or living in Deanmill. Indeed, I felt like a second class citizen in the community, looked down on by others. I considered that the management's attitude to its workforce was uncaring and the township was disgusting.

The township of Deanmill was the biggest potential drawcard to potential employees and the only reason I stayed there was the housing that the company provided. However, I found that the township was dirty, noisy and unhygienic with sewerage overflowing from septic and leach drains into open drains where children played. Plumbing at the houses was disgraceful with drains always blocking up. The main water supply came from a dam on the mill site. Immediately above the site was the mill refuse dump, which possibly had been used for 20 years. All houses at Deanmill had rainwater tanks and Braemar water heaters using main water. Unfortunately, the heaters were always overflowing onto the roof, sending the dubious dam water into the rainwater tank. The township had absolutely no facilities for children.

There were plenty of opportunities that the industry could have taken to present a more attractive image of itself and provide an environment that would have encouraged the employees to be ambassadors for it. Deanmill is situated in a naturally scenic part of the southwest. Although the township itself is ugly, it could have been improved by thoughtful landscaping and major tree planting at minimal cost. The mill itself should have been hidden from the township by trees, thus eliminating the dust and noise coming from the mill. The company should have identified the benefits that a well-maintained township can have. It should have corrected the sub-standard, plumbing and drainage or should have been forced to by the authorities. The industry did little or nothing that I could see to make conditions better for the people at Deanmill or present an attractive image to either visitors or its environmental critics.

5 CLOSING

During the debate on the establishment of a wood chipping licence in WA, I, like the majority of fellow West Australians with no knowledge of the industry, was told that this licence would use waste from the saw milling industry. My understanding of waste, as explained by the wood-chipping lobby, was basically the fallen tree minus the saw log, i.e., the crown and parts of the tree not suitable for sawn timber production. With this understanding I felt comfortable with supporting a woodchip licence.

History very quickly established that the public was conned by politicians and the woodchip lobby. Their interpretation of waste or 'forest residue' as they call it, was in fact everything that grew in the forest that did not meet 1st grade sawlog specification. This meant that vast amounts of ancient karri and marri were clear-felled to support this insatiable, destructive industry.

I remember visiting the Diamond chip mill site in the late 1980s and noticed a row of huge ancient logs lining the road leading to the chip mill landing. I enquired why they were positioned in such a way. The reply I received is an example of the incompetent, vandalistic attitude timber industry management had towards our forests. These logs were "Trophy Logs"! During my 8 years working in the timber industry, I never felt more ashamed of being part of an industry that treated the resource on which it and its workforce depended with such contempt.

The past timber industry in Western Australia is an example of corporate vandalism aided by various governments. The demise of this industry is a direct result of greed and incompetence. Our forests have been exploited and the decent, hardworking mill workers in this industry have also been exploited and used as pawns by the organizations only interested in making a quick profit.

The forests belong to all Australians and I would like to express my gratitude to all environmentalists who have contributed to saving what is left for my grandchildren and future generations of Australians.