

Illusive sustainability: An overview of recent experience

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ABSTRACT: The paper traces the path of recent Western Australian forest management towards the ideal of sustainable forest management. It draws on the author's experience as a Member of the Environmental Protection Authority and as a Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council.

1 INTRODUCTION

The general purpose of this paper is to provide a documented overview of the path of recent Western Australian forest practices towards the ideal of ecologically sustainable forest management, and to draw upon some parallels elsewhere in Australia. It recounts some of my experience as a Member—and the first woman—on the Environmental Protection Authority of WA (1990-1995), and as a Member of Parliament (from 1996) representing the South-West Region in the upper house of the State Parliament for the West Australian Greens party. During this time I chaired three Parliamentary Inquiries into forest related issues (Legislative Council of WA, Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development 1998, 1999, 2000).

Before exploring the difficulties of realising sustainable forest management, I acknowledge that progress has been made towards improved ecological sensitivity of our forest management system in recent years. Most particularly, the reservation of all remaining old-growth has been a very significant milestone, although its formal gazettal is not yet complete. It has been an important collective achievement for the conservation movement, the scientific community, the Greens party, and the Gallop Government.

This old-growth policy milestone overturned the outcome of the WA Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) with the Federal Government, which the Liberal-National Coalition State Government had already started to back away by protecting sixteen forest icon blocks in addition to the RFA reserve system. This move away from the RFA manifested itself as a potent political alliance across the party spectrum during the highly charged debate on my private members bill, *High Conservation Value Forests Protection Bill 1999*. It enjoyed Labor Opposition and Democrat support to pass the upper house. It was introduced into the Assembly by the independent MP, Dr Liz Constable, but failed to pass even though National Party MP in the Coalition Government, Hon Bob Wiese, crossed the floor in the vote (*Hansard* WA Legislative Council, 12th May 1999, and Legislative Assembly 16th June 1999). The National Party put considerable work into a new progressive forest policy statement some political distance from their Liberal Coalition colleagues (National Party of

WA 2001). I had already briefed them about the activities of the Executive Director of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and raised the matter publicly in Parliament (*Hansard*, Legislative Council 1st July 1998). The 2001 State Election saw Labor gain Government on a policy of protecting all old-growth forests.

Thus a milestone was achieved. Moreover, the Conservation Commission and CALM Science have achieved further things for the forest environment, most particularly in securing better protection for fauna habitat by having 55,000 ha dedicated under the new Forest Management Plans 2004-2013 (Conservation Commission of WA 2004, Appendix 4, p.95). However, outside the extended reserve system, the system of forest management has continued to leave a heavy footprint through large-scale intensive logging, and virtually none footprint when it comes to management objectives which do not come under the rubric of logging and burning. That is to say, every other consideration is virtually unfunded and neglected, so that very little tending work takes place. It leads some community conservationists to assume that all management is negative and conclude that the forests should be left completely alone.

It is a commonplace to hear older timers remark that sensitive logging of jarrah forests 'went out the window' with the end of the old Forest Department's tree marking system of selective harvesting. It had been pursued from approximately 1940 to 1970, before the changeover CALM (Calver and Wardell-Johnson 2004). We are yet to get back to that future.

2 INDUSTRY MODEL

Foresters often seem to speak about their silvicultural practices in an *economic* vacuum. Perhaps this is some sort of professional defence mechanism whereby generations of foresters, whose long-term forestry game plans have been so often overruled by their Ministerial masters, have come to practise their expertise in a neutral poise as if divorced from the demands of timber contracts. It's as if clear-felling is implemented for the good of the forest.

An example of that is currently taking place at Warra in Tasmania, where Forestry Tasmania is seeking to explore silvicultural alternatives to clear-felling in well-funded and expertly executed silvicultural trials. The problem is that they are still bound by law to produce 300,000m³ of sawlogs per year of a specification that accepts only some 10% of the trees in any coupe to be sawlogs. The rest is wood chipped, rain forest and all (Forestry Tasmania 2001, p.56). With that hanging over them it is difficult to design a silvicultural alternative to clear-felling that is anything but a 'Clayton's choice'.

Aggregated and dispersed retention systems are valid silvicultural alternatives. However when they are practised in the context of the fixed timber and woodchip volumes they make a mockery of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) principles. But the really serious problem is that the new alternative—just like its purer clear-felling precedent which is still applied throughout Tasmania's high conservation forests—*permanently removes the rain forest component*. All this is taking place in forests boasting the tallest flowering plants in the world and the finest remaining cool temperate rainforest. Reform of Tasmania's forestry to a path of ESFM is not possible without alteration and radical reduction of the timber contracts and legislated resource security. Ironically it is the trial of Single Tree and Small Group Selection at Warra, added as an afterthought by Forestry Tasmania as the result of pressure from Tasmania's craftsmen, which is the only clear-felling alternative being trailed that retains the rainforest species in the ecosystem. It has been dismissed as unworkable under resource security requirements (Hans Drielsma, General Manager, Forestry Tasmania, *pers. comm.*).

A similar historical model of silvicultural expertise being overshadowed by excessive logging contracts has characterised the over-cutting of jarrah in Western Australia from 1988 until 2003. The three-fold Bradshaw prescription—named after the respected WA forester, Jack Bradshaw—was introduced in 1986. It was originally called Jarrah Stand Improvement because it aimed to improve regrowth forest structure by non-commercial thinning. However its implementation soon caused great controversy because massive new logging and woodchip contracts, which permitted

clear-felling of the mixed marri-jarrah stands for the first time. Prior to this, woodchipping in WA had been restricted to a Licence Area whose boundaries corresponded to the more southerly karri-marri forests.

The level of the sawlog contractual commitment was also clearly unsustainable and gave rise to some years of argument over the allowable cut. The ten-year Forest Management Plans of 1987-1997 had to be reissued in 1993, after a recall by the Environmental Protection Authority (CALM 1992). This was done on the basis that the implementation of the Bradshaw prescription had been put into operation without a required assessment of the potential impacts on salt risk zones of intensive canopy removal. The trouble was that when CALM's original proposed level of 675,000m³ of jarrah sawlogs for the allowable cut was reduced, it was set at 490,000m³ because of long-term contractual commitments already entered into by CALM in 1988. This was considerably higher than the sustained yield calculations of 250,000 to 300,000m³ determined in a 1992 assessment under Part IV of the *Environmental Protection Act* (Minson 1993; see also *Hansard*, Legislative Council, 1st July 1998, 20th August 2004 for further discussion of these problems). Although Dr Shea, the Executive Director of CALM, was finally called to account to meet the statutory requirements of Ministerial Commitments set under the Act, the allowable cut was not reduced commensurately to the level of the Department's own calculation of the sustainable yield.

Over the next six years it emerged that the jarrah sawlog contracts had been opportunistically set at levels that were far higher than market demands because CALM had a vested financial interest in maximising the timber revenue. All royalties went directly to it, not into consolidated revenue, until it was split up in 2000. There was virtually no industry complaint when, in 1999, the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) reduced the jarrah cut to 324,000m³, because that figure cut had been derived from the previous years' actual timber sales. In other words, the massive over-determination of the allowable cut was way higher than the quantity that the market could absorb, despite a substantial fall in the retail price of jarrah over these years.

Now, in the new Forest Management Plans 2004-2013, we are again going down the path of a large-scale intensive industry with a heavy footprint. This is not just because the local industry has lost control of the majority of jarrah milling to Gunns of Tasmania, but because the protection of old-growth has *not* been implemented in conjunction with a new timber industry model; one in which the sustainable yield is derived from an ESFM yield. In my view, the outcome of the timber industry restructure is an expensive failure. Although timber contracts are for the statutory ten-year period of the Forest Management Plan, the WA timber industry has been provided with a formal Investment Security Guarantee effective for the next contract cycle (*Hansard*, Legislative Council, 13th May, 2004, Question on Notice 1905). As a result, we have locked in up to twenty more years of large-scale intensive harvesting prescriptions for some three quarters of a million hectares of the remaining regrowth forests. Ironically, we have allowed commodity mills to control the timber industry, and despite the rhetoric about adding value, the fine woodcraft sector and the WA furniture makers have no resource guarantee at all.

I have discussed elsewhere that current sustainable yield modelling continues to permit rampant *juvenilisation* of the average age of the trees in WA's forests (Sharp 1995). This is demanding attention if we are to focus on resource security to provide a future for the fine furniture and the woodcraft sectors.

ESFM will only be achievable when Western Australia devises a silviculture dedicated to ESFM objectives for the restoration of the forest structure, age classes, resilience and bio-diversity, rather than maximising the short-term cut of juvenile sawlogs (which would have been impossible without the recent technical assistance of kiln drying). ESFM would demand a radical to the calculation of the sustained yield that would provide the context for a small-scale timber industry. The only high-value small-scale timber industry is the fine woodcraft industry. We need exactly the sector we have just cut loose from resource security to implement ESFM. The timber tenders and contracts being finalised currently mean at least a ten-year delay on progress towards an ecologically sensitive silvicultural footprint in WA's state forests.

Despite the rhetoric of sustainability during the past decade, we have failed to resolve the tensions between conservation and timber extraction by implementing a smaller logging footprint in

the forests. To do so would directly challenge the operations of the commodity-driven native timber industry. Recent experience in WA suggests that we have only been prepared to challenge the industry model indirectly through conservation aspirations for old-growth protection. We have not been prepared to reform the industry model itself purely in order to manage the resource for ecological sustainability. Instead we have implemented a system of land use zoning to resolve the policy conflicts. As a result, we have divided the forests into extensive reserves and intensive harvesting zones in which respective interest groups hold sway. Yet it was these same intensive methods, and introduction of clear-felling in the early 1970's in particular, that caused the rise of the forest movement in WA. I think that it is unlikely that the public will accept the unstable compromise of zoning, given that the severe impacts of logging continue to be widespread in the Swan and South-West regions of the State.

3 COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

The last point I am keen to bring up is that Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management probably needs formal community involvement. This is a comment on the *social bottom line*. The only way that the vital, labour-intensive requirements of monitoring, biological observation and silvicultural tendering are achievable on the necessary fine scale is through community input.

Many of us watch with great interest the progress of the Wombat Community Forest Management programme, which began last year in Victoria under the umbrella of their Department of Sustainability and Environment. Although promoted by the Victorian Government in a thoughtful experiment to overcome the divisiveness of forest management conflicts, its real test is to demonstrate that its decision-making structures can deliver ecological as well as political benefits. Does community-based management offer a real way past the polarisation of forest debate to allow a broad consensus to be achieved?

I predict that this programme will successfully spawn similar community management programmes elsewhere in Australia that will eventually trickle through to WA. By the end of ten-year management cycle that has just begun, we may be well and truly willing to support labour-intensive, small-scale fine woodcrafts and install community management structures to form a *triple bottom line model*.

4 CONCLUSION

Since the advent of the concept of sustainability in 1987, public policy objectives have advocated a triple bottom line approach with which to assess development. However, forest managers have been applying sustained yield methods for centuries. In considering the overlay of the new policy rhetoric of sustainability on the recent era of forest management in WA, we find both that a triple bottom line approach remains illusive. This is due to the ineffectiveness of value-adding requirements, so that—despite the efforts of the new Conservation Commission who have finally enforced a sustainable yield approach—we must still wait for the development of a forestry practice based on an ecologically sustainable yield (Davis 2000; Wardell-Johnson and Calver 2000).

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