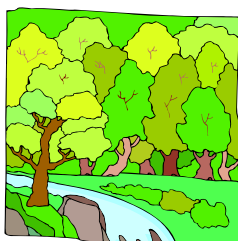


**A SUBMISSION TO THE
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY
INTO THE
TASMANIAN FORESTS AGREEMENT**

BY

ERIC LOCKETT

FOREST SCIENTIST



JANUARY 2013

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

We are all some shade of green; none of us wants to see our environment trashed. This is particularly true of professional foresters. Wherever there is an established system of national parks a professional forester can usually be found behind its origins. I lodge this submission as a private citizen whose love of forests and the outdoors led me to become a professional forest scientist.

In 1964, in the Styx and Florentine Valleys, I began more than three decades of research into native forests silviculture with the Tasmanian Forestry Commission (now Forestry Tasmania). For some years I was their most senior researcher in that field and I spent two terms as chairman of a nationwide Research Working Group charged with advising the Australian Forestry Council. Over the years I have been the author of a large number of research papers, silvicultural guidelines and prescriptions. In 1996 I left Forestry Tasmania to pursue some of my other interests. Some forestry consulting and two overseas postings to the Solomon Islands and Fiji as a volunteer expert forestry advisor followed, but I have not been actively involved in forestry since 2006.

Nevertheless, I have followed developments in Tasmanian forestry with interest and growing concern over that whole time. Up until now I have refrained from public comment about the latest forestry agreement process while it ran its course. I am now grateful that the Legislative Council has finally provided the first opportunity for people such as myself, someone with a thorough general knowledge of and concern for forests and forestry but no vested interests on either side, to be heard on this matter.

I commend the Legislative Council for setting up this inquiry and deplore the criticism it has attracted for seeking to properly fulfil its role as representatives of the Tasmanian people. It is a matter of deep regret to me that forestry has become such a political football that the science of forestry has become almost completely overwhelmed by politics. I sometimes wonder whether all the time and effort that I and many others have put into better understanding our forests in the hope that this may assist in their better management will now count for nothing. I hope that this inquiry might help ensure that it doesn't.

THE LEAD UP TO THIS INQUIRY

The existing Regional Forest Agreement, which only came into effect in 1997, established a sound basis for forest land use in Tasmania. The only problem has been the reluctance of environmentalists to accept its provisions, hence the ongoing unrest in our forests. This, combined with a downturn in the forest industries, has led industry representatives to further consultations with environmentalist representatives in the hope of achieving peace and eventually gaining government assistance for industry re-structuring. The environmental groups have seen this as an opportunity to put even more forest into reserves while the only concessions they needed to make were to give some in principle assurances of support for the forest industries. But the question that must now be asked is whether these measures based on opportunism and short term expediency really serve the best interests of Tasmania's forests, its forest industries and its people.

The Tasmanian Forests Agreement Bill (the Bill), which is the principal subject of this inquiry and deals mainly with the detailing of volumes of wood to be made available, the workings of the Special Council and the provisions for creating further reserves, is perhaps

more notable for what it doesn't say than what it does. It doesn't, for example, indicate how much additional forest is proposed to be placed into reserves.

My difficulties in preparing a considered submission have now been compounded by the news that the Government wants to introduce 158 pages of amendments to the Bill that has already passed through the lower house (158 pages of amendments to a 63 page bill??). This clearly shows that the Bill, as it stands, was ill-considered and it was highly irresponsible to have expected the Legislative Council to hastily wave it through. Nevertheless, the inquiry's Terms of Reference include any other matters incidental thereto, so in the course of this submission I will make frequent reference to the Tasmanian Forest Agreement (the Agreement) which gave rise to the Bill.

The objectives and vision statement contained in the Agreement are very high sounding and laudable. But the question is whether the agreement and, more particularly, the draft Bill is capable of ensuring their achievement.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR SOUND FOREST MANAGEMENT

While it is for the people of Tasmania to decide for what purposes their forests should best be used, this decision must be soundly-based. It is vital to remember that forests are impervious to legislation, ideology, politics or popular opinion: they are governed only by the immutable laws of nature. Good forest management is not that which has popular appeal but that which is likely to produce the most beneficial outcomes. Decisions must be based on a thorough scientific understanding of the ecology and nature of the forest concerned. To treat all forests, or even all logged forests, alike would make as much sense as for the medical profession to treat all patients alike. That is, forest managers and governments must adjust their policies to the nature and capabilities of the forest rather than expecting the forests to conform to policies based on a combination of ideology, populism, wishful thinking or political expediency.

Multiple use management

Professional foresters have for centuries been practising forest management in accord with the following principles expounded by the United Nations as recently as 1993:

“Forest resources and forest lands should be sustainably managed to meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations”¹.

Unfortunately, environmental activists have put such overwhelming emphasis on the ecological aspects of this statement as to virtually exclude the other needs. Foresters have long recognised that, in most cases, these principles can best be met by multiple use management. This doesn't mean that all uses should be permitted in all places at all times, but that the benefits that forests can provide will be maximised where as many uses as can be sustainably accommodated are permitted. Although logging will need to be excluded from some areas, sound multiple use management incorporating logging is generally compatible with meeting most of those other needs, including the ecological ones. Furthermore, there is absolutely no reason why most of our native forests cannot be sustainably managed for timber production indefinitely. On the other hand, it is rather disquieting to see that the Bill would re-define what was previously called 'multiple use forest land' as 'permanent timber production zone land', which plays down its other benefits.

¹ United Nations (1993). *Earth Summit: Agenda 21*. United Nations, New York, USA.

Sustainability

The most fundamental principle of sound forest management is that of sustainability. This means that where logging occurs the long term harvesting rate must not exceed the long term growth rate and the logged forest must be adequately regenerated to ensure that this growth rate is sustained. Paradoxically, pressure from anti-forestry activists is often aimed at preventing measures such as clearfelling, which are absolutely indispensable for achieving adequate regeneration in certain forests, or reducing the area available for cutting, which inevitably creates pressure to overcut what is left.

In contrast to the remarkably short-sighted and blinkered approach by some who seem unable to see beyond the coupe they currently describe as ‘destroyed’ to the thriving regrowth forest across the road that was similarly treated twenty years ago, or to look forward to how the current one will be twenty years hence, harvest planning and yield prediction extends forward for many decades, perhaps up to a century. This time-frame makes forestry unique. While there is some flexibility to accommodate changing circumstances such as market fluctuations, the imposition of avoidable, dramatic change is incompatible with sound forest management. Yet it came as no surprise that a move some years ago to compensate for the excision of production forests for further reserves by converting some native forests to more productive plantations in order to maintain sustainability was opposed by environmentalists.

Forestry Tasmania has, over many decades, spent literally millions of dollars measuring our forests to assess timber volumes and growth rates and using these data to predict future yields for planning purposes. No-one does it better than they do and no-one knows better how to interpret and apply the data. Nor does anyone have a greater incentive to get it right. When others have moved on, Forestry Tasmania will still have carry the consequences of their own judgments. Their ultimate objective is to ensure that the forest industries are sustainable in the long term. It is unfortunate that Professor Jonathan West of the Independent Verification Group at one stage misinterpreted their results to falsely claim that current cutting rates were unsustainable.

It is imperative though that any warnings from Forestry Tasmania that the increased allocation to reserves proposed by the environmental activists and incorporated in the Agreement would not allow the future industry to be sustainably supplied from the diminished resource base be heeded. Sufficient production forest must remain available to sustainably meet our forest industries’ foreseeable needs in perpetuity.

However, even though the approach of legislating for the provision of a specified minimum amount of timber, as this Bill would do, may be preferred by the industry, I believe this is wrong in principle. As stated earlier, forests do not respond to legislative measures. A more valid approach would be, having ensured that the resource was sufficient to maintain a strong and viable industry, to leave the actual allocations of various products to those who are best equipped to calculate what the forests are capable of sustainably producing from time to time, i.e. the forest scientists of Forestry Tasmania. This would allow them to periodically adjust the allocations according to changing demand and revised growth estimates.

SOME QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE FACED UP TO

Who should decide what goes into reserves and on what basis should that decision be made?

In this case the Government seems happy to have allowed environmental NGOs with little or no expertise in forestry, who have assumed a role as self-appointed guardians of our forest estate but are answerable to no-one, to usurp its responsibility for forest land use decisions. At this stage, neither the Government nor the Independent Verification Group seem inclined to

seriously question the justification for the proposed additional reserves. It is hard to escape the conclusion that this is a (futile?) attempt to buy off the anti-forestry activists, rather than a response to a clearly demonstrated need for a greater area of reserves.

The principle these organisations seem to have adopted is that if anything worth preserving can be found in a forest then the whole area should be reserved, regardless of whether this is necessary for its protection or whether the broader and longer term social and environmental consequences of creating extra reserves justify it. Bearing in mind that the creation of additional reserves will have no effect on the global demand for wood products, we should remember that every additional hectare reserved in Tasmania is likely to mean an additional hectare logged elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region where much lower environmental standards generally prevail, or the replacement of renewable wood products by much less environmentally friendly alternatives. The consequences of a reduction in the area available for logging should never be disregarded, as the environmental organisations have done, in making these decisions.

How much is enough?

Maps that have been released whenever new reserves were created show a clear pattern of what could be characterised as ‘reserve creep’. This is evident in the latest maps of reserve proposals (see, for example, Mackey 2012²). A crucial question that needs to be asked is why, given that around half of Tasmania’s native forests is already in formal reserves (a figure between four and five times the worldwide average), do we need to reserve more.

If the current reserves were so ill-chosen as not to incorporate all the ‘high conservation value forests’ then they must include large areas of low conservation value forests capable of wood production. The overall proportion currently reserved vastly exceeds all the comprehensiveness targets that have been set for individual forest ecosystem types (see Mackey 2012³), meaning that some types must already be grossly over-represented. Which areas of these forests would the environmentalists be happy to release to ensure that logging remains sustainable in return for any additional reservations? A further question is whether excluding productive human activity would result in the additional reserved forests being better or less well cared for, especially in terms of allowing access for worthwhile purposes including fire management.

The ill defined terms ‘unique’, ‘high conservation value’ and ‘the last of’ are very convenient in that, with a little imagination, they may be applied to virtually any tract of forest. If looked at in fine enough detail every ecosystem, forest stand, plant and animal on this earth is indeed unique and therefore the last of its kind. And, despite any implications to the contrary, the conservation value of a forest is not something that can readily be measured in absolute terms. How does one compare the value of a forestry township’s livelihood with the value of a rare insect that inhabits the forest? Regardless of countless academic studies that purport to put a figure on such values, this is, by its very nature, a subjective judgment on which different people will reach different conclusions. For those who give preserving an untouched environment priority above everything else there will always be a reason to be found to categorise any forest as of ‘high conservation value’.

Similarly, if something deserving protection warrants the reservation of the whole tract of forest in which it occurs then it would be hard to find any forests that didn’t warrant such reservation. (Perhaps there is a hint of this in the reference in the Agreement’s Vision Statement to, ‘A long term approach to land and resource management which optimises conservation functions at a landscape level’.) But the real questions that need to be asked are whether what is found is sufficiently different from what is already reserved to warrant

² Brendan Mackey, ANU: *Tasmanian Forestry Agreement, Summary Report of Conservation Values*. Prepared for the Independent Verification Group, March 2012.

³ Brendan Mackey, ANU: *op cit*.

special protection, whether this can only be achieved through formal reservation and how much needs to be reserved to satisfy those objectives. Experience shows that the ultimate aim of many activists is not to ensure that the reserves are adequate but to pursue a goal of total reservation. Dr Bob Brown was recently incautious enough to publicly let this slip in response to a question about how much would be enough.

The creation of new reserves should only occur where it is scientifically and socially justifiable. Any attempt to use it as a means to buy off anti-forestry activists it is doomed to failure.

Are environmental activists sincere in claiming to support the forest industries?

History reveals the constant moving of the forest management goalposts by environmental activists. In my experience, opposition to the clearfelling of old growth forest has become opposition to the clearfelling of native forest, then opposition to the logging of 'high conservation value forests', then opposition to the logging of old growth forests, which is now becoming opposition to the logging of native forests. Opposition to pine plantations became opposition to eucalypt plantations until the existence of those same plantations is now claimed as grounds for opposing the logging of native forests. Opposition to land clearing has become opposition to the re-establishment of trees on cleared farmland. How confident can we be that once the activists have been able to find some environmental benefits from eucalypt plantations (especially given that they are mostly on previously cleared land) they won't oppose their harvesting when the time comes?

Similarly, while environmental activists have purported to support downstream processing, which we urgently need, whenever a proposal has looked like becoming a reality, they have found some reason to oppose it. Their vehement opposition to a much needed pulp mill and their current attempts to commercially sabotage Ta Ann's operations are cases in point. This is what happens when people have built careers on forest conflict. Whether they win or lose a particular battle they can simply shrug their shoulders and move on to another target. They are most unlikely to declare themselves redundant and quietly go away. In contrast, those who depend for their livelihoods on stability in the industry have no such luxury and can be very seriously impacted by the actions of an irresponsible, self-serving few.

What would be the overall effects of a diminished Tasmanian forest industry?

Australians have for many years spent about twice as much on wood product imports as on exports, leaving an annual net import bill of around one hundred dollars for every man, woman and child in the country. Incongruously, at the same time as we have been exporting our raw materials, many of these imports have been of overseas manufactured products such as paper or timber products sourced from other countries in the Asia Pacific region where social and environmental standards are vastly inferior to our own. It is crazy from every perspective to seek to diminish and perhaps ultimately destroy our own forest-based industries, thereby encouraging the wasteful use of resources in shipping raw materials overseas, while exporting jobs and economic benefits with them, then importing the finished products.

Anyone seeking to get out of forestry at this time of downturn can't be blamed for wanting to grasp at the straw of monetary compensation, but as representatives charged with serving the best interests of Tasmania's forests and all its people, our members of parliament need to take a longer and broader view. While industry re-adjustment may be needed, we must face up to the question of whether it is socially, economically or environmentally responsible to strangle the forest industries by further permanently diminishing their available resources.

Any unnecessary curtailment of Tasmania's forest industries will inevitably create pressure for the replacement of local wood products by those produced elsewhere in a much less responsible manner or by materials such as metal, plastics, glass or concrete, all manufactured

from non-renewable resources in a manner that has a much greater environmental impact. Any who engage in economic sabotage of our own forest industries or would-be industries are not only economic but also environmental vandals. They should be penalised, not rewarded.

SOME FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Carbon in forests

The Bill makes some reference to the possibility that reserved forests may assist in the reduction of atmospheric carbon dioxide and much has been made of this in some quarters. But, in the long run, the repeated sequestration of carbon in harvested wood products off-site, followed by the re-establishment of a vigorous regrowth forest which can act as a carbon extraction plant will be more effective than simply maintaining forest undisturbed as a carbon storehouse. Furthermore, any artificially created financial benefits from the cessation of productive activity should never be regarded as secure. Only wealth generated by productive activity is ultimately real. I, along I believe with most Tasmanians, would rather live in a state that can be proud of earning its own keep than in a mendicant state ultimately reliant on handouts from elsewhere.

Socio-economic modelling

The Agreement states that: ‘The IGA Socio-economic Modeling (sic) will be run and publicly released to report on the regional and statewide impacts of the agreement’. But it appears that the results of such modelling have not yet been publicly released and the Intergovernmental Agreement implies that they will only be used to decide where government assistance, predominantly in the form of ‘make work’ or training schemes, will be needed after the new reserves have been created. The study by Lockwood and Cadman for the Independent Verification Group⁴ deliberately did not investigate the social values of continued harvesting, nor even whether the social values in areas proposed for reservation could be equally well maintained without reservation. It seems that the socio-economic impacts of excluding harvesting will not be taken into account in deciding whether particular reserve proposals are justified or not. In other words, the impacts of further reservation on the non-human component of the environment will be properly considered but the impacts on humans will not. This seems fundamentally wrong. Consideration of its human impact should be an important factor in assessing the merits of any new reserve proposal prior to its finalisation.

WHAT THEN OF THE AGREEMENT?

How much confidence can we have in overall support for the Tasmanian Forests Agreement?

Although I have only media reports to go on, it is hard to have much confidence in the Tasmanian Forests Agreement. It appears to have to have taken two years of cajoling, coercion and dire threats of the consequences of failure before this agreement could be reached by a group that excluded some of those with a significant interest in the matters under discussion and met behind closed doors. My confidence was even further diminished by reports that between reaching agreement and signing up, some provisions were changed without all parties’ consent. It then transpired that the Timber Communities Australia

⁴ Michael Lockwood and Sean Cadman: *Social Values and Considerations for Effective Reserve Establishment and Management*, Independent Verification Group Report February 2012.

representative, who only signed after the list of signatories incorporated under the definition of the *Tasmanian Forests Agreement* in section 3 of the Bill was drawn up, acted contrary to the wishes of those he purported to represent.

Then questions were raised about whether the Bill properly reflected the agreement signed. As if that didn't create enough doubt, the Government has now indicated it wants to introduce an enormous number of amendments to the Bill that has already passed the lower house – amendments about which neither the parties to the Agreement nor anyone else has been consulted.

Finally, some of the most intransigent anti-forestry activists (my reflections on the motivations of such people are incorporated in Appendix 1) have made it crystal clear that they will not cease their actions, as the Agreement expects. To anyone familiar with history, the claims of 'peace in our forests' invoke a hollow echo of Chamberlain's 'peace for our time' following the signing of the Munich agreement just before the outbreak of World War Two. Any belief that peace will eventuate seems to owe much more to wishful thinking than an honest, realistic appraisal of its prospects. This is especially so when, despite those on the industry side having everything to lose by on-going conflict, those on the other side have built their careers on forest conflict. This can be confirmed by a brief look back over Tasmanian forest history.

When it has taken two years of cajoling, threats and inducements for the opposing parties to arrive at a statement they could sign this seems more likely to be an indication that they have struggled to find a form of words that each could interpret in their own diverse ways than that they have reached a genuine consensus. And when so many doubts have been expressed from so many different quarters about the contents of the Agreement, and the Bill that is supposed to implement its provisions has had such a chequered history, that is hardly an indication of the wholehearted support that would be needed from the industry, environmentalists and the broader community to make it work. Nor does it indicate the Government's confidence that it has got it right.

Will the Agreement hold?

A search of the Agreement for measures to ensure the much vaunted 'peace in our forests' reveals little but a commitment to in principle support for its vision by the signatories, backed up by so-called 'durability reports' from the Special Council to the Minister at key stages. But, as noted above, Tasmanian environmental activists have long asserted their in principle support for forest industries, and especially downstream processing, while finding some reason to oppose virtually every venture that seems likely to be actually established. And even if the formal signatories publicly supported a venture there would always be an assortment of splinter groups of activists who would continue their opposition. Such groups may constitute only a few people but, if determined enough, can cause massive disruption to forest industries and can utilise the media to rally opposition against even the most worthy of enterprises.

Furthermore, the durability of these so-called 'durability reports' doesn't appear to extend beyond 2015, a ludicrously short time frame in forestry terms. Once the environmentalists' target of something over half a million hectares of additional reserves has been achieved by March 2015 they will have nothing to lose by disregarding any adverse durability reports and immediately initiating a campaign to push on towards the ultimate goal of the reservation of all of Tasmania's native forests, under a threat of industry destruction. One could have more confidence in their good faith if they had demonstrated such good faith in the past, but that is not the case. In the light of past processes that were expected to appease environmentalists' demands (Professor West, in one report from the Independent Verification Group, listed 10 such processes over the last 26 years), but were only seen by them as stepping stones to ever more reservations, there is little cause for optimism. Sooner, rather than later, the Government needs to stand firm and say enough is enough.

The Agreement's chances of achieving anything beyond an increased area of national parks, for which the need is questionable, accompanied by a diminished forest industry with diminished prospects of future viability, plus some compensation for those who get out, seem minimal. Regrettably, but realistically, the noble sentiments in its Vision Statement about a strong, competitive forest sector and strong, cohesive and resilient Tasmanian communities seem little more than wishful thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that the most important objectives for an agreement such as this should be to:

- Ensure the maintenance of an adequate forest reserve system,
- Ensure the on-going availability of an adequate resource base to provide for a sustainable and economically viable forest products industry to meet society's needs in perpetuity,
- Ensure that the viability of this industry is not compromised by the actions of individuals or groups aiming to disrupt or economically sabotage its operations.

I am not convinced that the Bill, as it stands, will meet either of the last two objectives. Given the large number of amendments proposed, amendments which are currently unavailable to me, it is unclear whether this can be achieved by the final bill or whether the whole exercise will have to be regarded as a time-consuming and costly failure.

Given that the Agreement has already taken two years to negotiate, I urge the Committee to recommend against the Legislative Council hastily passing this legislation under a threat of the withdrawal of commonwealth financial assistance. These are important land use decisions that properly lie with parliament, guided by informed and objective advice as to what best serves the interests of Tasmania and Tasmanians overall. They are too important to become the prize from a battle between different sectional interest groups.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

A personal perspective on the origins and nature of environmentalism

I was a forestry student at the ANU when the Vietnam War ended and the rumour then was that the new focus of the student protest movement was to be the environment. I was sceptical, but thought that if that did happen then we, as professional foresters, could expect the wholehearted support of these new 'environmentalists'. After all, forests are a vital component of our environment and professional foresters have been practising sustainable natural resource management (a concept only recently discovered by the general public) for centuries. How wrong I was!

Regrettably, after many hours listening and talking to environmentalists and reading their writings since then, I have now been forced to the conclusion that, by its nature and origins, environmentalism is a protest movement rather than a conservation movement. It is only by recognising this fact that one can make sense of the behaviour of its adherents. The seeking of advice from those best qualified to offer it is alien to any protest movement, which operates on the principle that 'we know best'. Environmentalism is more about psychology than ecology, more about feeling good than doing good. The easiest way to feel good about oneself without going to the trouble of actually doing good is to first demonise these of a different view. One can then feel highly self-righteous just for attacking them. This proves (if only to themselves) that the environmentalists are on the side of the angels, regardless of whether that is actually true or not.

Along with this goes a totalitarian streak and an implicit belief that human beings, rather than being an integral part of the natural environment, are an alien and malevolent influence. If all human impact can be removed then the sun will always shine and the environment will assume a state of idyllic perfection and harmony. This disregards the fact that all creatures, not just human beings, utilise the environment to their own advantage to whatever extent they are able to do so. The only difference is that we, by virtue of our greater intellectual capacity, have a greater responsibility to think more carefully and behave more responsibly in our interactions with the environment.

There are many shades of green. Many true conservationists do valuable conservation work on the ground either privately or through organisations such as Greening Australia, Landcare, Bushcare and Coastcare. And many others support the politically and ideologically based bodies such as the Wilderness Society and the Greens in the well intended but rather naïve belief that in doing so they are supporting conservation. But those at the forefront of such organisations, and the many splinter protest groups associated with them, should never be confused with conservationists, as people in the media do all too often. It seems that all that is necessary to attract the conservationist tag in Tasmania is to attack forestry, even when the sound and environmentally sensitive existing forest management contrasts starkly with the environmentally irresponsible alternatives proposed by the environmentalists. Hence, throughout this submission I have used the terms 'environmental activists' or 'anti-forestry activists' to describe such people, as I believe it would demean the term 'conservationist' (of which I am one) to use it in this context.

The anti forestry activists' misleading of the Tasmanian people into believing that excluding disturbance from the tall, wet eucalypt forests of the Styx and Florentine would ensure that the giant *E. regnans* trees of around 400 years of age will remain there forever for future generations to admire is a revealing case study. It illustrates their willingness to support a position that is diametrically opposed to soundly based conservation when they find it expedient to do so. In fact, those stands owe their very existence to massive wildfire disturbance around two hundred years before white settlement. If similar disturbance doesn't occur within the lifetime of the existing trees (say the next fifty years), either due to another holocaust that would pay no regard to conservation or human needs or in a controlled manner via human intervention, they will disappear from the site, effectively forever. This is really elementary forest ecology about which there is no dispute whatsoever, but the anti-forestry activists are in wilful denial of the facts because this makes their ideologically motivated campaign easier to 'sell' to the public and to ill-informed people overseas.

Eric Lockett