

Determining plantation prospects: parameters and purposes

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Revised manuscript received 18 December 2002

Summary

Consideration of the prospects for Australian plantations in 2002 follows national conferences on the topic, held in 1989 and 1974. Four parameters of change shape the prospects in 2002 in ways that differ from the earlier considerations. Globalisation has reduced the Australian content of the forest products industries. A new forest economy has been mooted based on tradeable permits for carbon emissions and credits for providing ecosystem services. The advance of neo-liberalism in public policy has led to the privatisation or corporatisation of state plantations and a wider range of types of plantation enterprise. The purposes of plantations are now more elaborate and public policies less direct or certain of their outcome.

Keywords: forest plantations; forest policy; forest economics; planning; Australia

Question and debate

Civil discourse lies at the heart of democracy and open debate is essential for science. Conferences and collections of papers, such as those in this issue, provide important means of facilitating our discourse. In them we can display our theories, findings, ideas, policies and practices in ways that encourage analysis, questioning and discussion. Is there new evidence? Did our theories hold up? Have circumstances changed? Have our policies worked well in practice? Reflection follows and we may find that we need to change or defend our ways. In doing so, we seek a better future, but may envisage it differently. What may be better for some may be worse for others. Some values are commonly agreed; others such as attitudes to nature, risk or property are not. Conferences and collections of papers are not arenas in which decisions are made; rather they are forums in which we can talk about changes and come to understand our differences and our agreements.

It is particularly welcome that the plantations conference, whose papers are reported in this issue, was convened jointly by the Bureau of Rural Sciences and the Australian National University.

The university was founded in 1946 as part of post-war reconstruction. One of the early documents envisaged it becoming 'a powerhouse for change' in Australia. It was thought that one way of advancing this would be the occasional interchange of personnel between academe and government. Other modes of interaction have developed to the benefit of both, particularly in the resource and environmental areas.

The 2002 conference followed on from the Prospects for Australian Forest Plantations conference held at the university in 1989 (Dargavel and Semple 1990) and the Prospects for Australian Hardwood Forests conference two years earlier (Dargavel and Sheldon 1987). Forests and plantations are not entirely separate and they were considered together at the national FORWOOD conference in 1974. The concerns of these conferences are worth briefly recalling as the setting for this one.

The FORWOOD conference was sponsored by the Australian Forestry Council and organised by twenty government and industry leaders with one academic, Professor Derrick Ovington from ANU, and one environmentalist, Vincent Serventy. It was to make recommendations to the Commonwealth Minister for Agriculture (Australian Forestry Council 1975). Its prime concern was to make a production forestry plan for long-term national wood supply. The Commonwealth's 1967 scheme for making soft loans to the States to establish plantations had been extended in 1972. The loans, it was urged, could be justified by forecasts of soaring demand and an ideal of achieving 'net self-sufficiency'. But would the rate of planting be enough to offset the declining yield of sawlogs from the native forests? Roughly it seemed it would. Expansion was to be mainly a State enterprise. Some Crown land was to be leased to plantation companies which, it was hoped, would continue to expand. Although the Commonwealth's scheme stopped, the States continued to expand their plantations, as did industrial companies. Overall, we can see the FORWOOD conference as a turning point in the expansion of State plantations and their explicit orientation to industry.

The trenchant environmental critique mounted by Richard and Val Routley (1972) from the 'powerhouse for change' pervaded the atmosphere of the FORWOOD conference. It bewildered the forestry establishment at the time because environmental

concerns were largely outside both government and professional scope. The critique and public pressure, however, eventually changed forestry practices. For example, significant areas of native forest are now no longer cleared to establish plantations, except in some areas of Tasmania.

By 1989 when the last plantations conference was held, the political context had completely changed. Environmental politics could sway elections, and environmental agencies were inside governments. The conference was stimulated by two bold proposals and there were concerns about import competition and social impacts. The proposals had very different purposes. One from the Australian Conservation Foundation aimed to grow enough wood so that all logging in native forests could be phased out; the other from a government-industry body aimed at industrial expansion by supplementing native forest logging with more wood from plantations. Although some expansion of eucalypt planting was envisaged, primarily on environmental grounds, the main interest was in pine plantations. The feasibility of either of these schemes was questioned. Would there be enough suitable land? Could Australian wood compete with imports from New Zealand? Or in Japanese and other markets? The advance of forest science, the impacts on rural communities and lessons gained from various plantation policies all had to be weighed when considering the questions. The conference revealed the weak state of policy analysis, a matter that the Resource Assessment Commission had started to address. Subsequently many of the Commission's recommendations were endorsed in the *National Forest Policy Statement* in 1992 and the Regional Forest Agreement process that followed. In 1997 the Commonwealth Government declared its *2020 Vision Statement* aimed at promoting a tripling of the area of plantations by that year.

The bold proposals put forward in 1989 have partly come about. The area of plantations has increased, pine has increasingly replaced hardwood on the sawn timber market, and some forests have been transferred to conservation reserves. It is these and other trends that formed the agenda for the latest conference.

Prospects

Personally, I am delighted that the latest conference echoed the title of *Prospects for Australian Forest Plantations*. 'Prospects' stimulates discussion because it is a word loaded with allusions and multiple meanings. I will label four. Consider them as metaphors for the way we think about plantations.

Scenic prospect

The scenic prospect is an extensive, all-embracing view of the landscape with its farms and forests, towns and mills. We look to the distance, rather than the foreground, and see both the natural and the human elements. The conference as a whole gazed at the scenic prospect. Its elements were depicted by various experts, how they might be put together was the overall task. We need to discuss a scenic prospect for plantations that will appeal to us, the Australian people.

Depicted prospects

Artists depict the landscape for us; so do scientists, specialists and lobbyists. One person may depict an appealing image, another an appalling one of the same place. We see it through their eyes, although our eyes may see things differently or imperfectly compared to what they intended. Their depictions, however, are powerful because they set the 'language' of communication. Consider how geographic information systems, with their arcane words and coloured maps, delineate the landscape in a way that suits land managers but not those interested in other scales or non-spatial values. In this conference, experts depict the prospects for plantations in their several 'languages'. We need to be alert to their silences and overcome their differences in our discourse.

The prospect drear

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But, Och! I backward cast my e'e on prospects drear!
And forward, though I canna see, I guess an' fear !

Robert Burns, *To a mouse*, 1786

The prospect drear is to be reckoned with. While Burns was writing and carousing, other minds were advancing the notion of progress. Rational inquiry, they held, would not only analyse human development but would advance it. Scientific and material advancement would march with moral and social improvement, so they thought. Burns saw more acutely. His ploughman's 'cruel coulter' destroyed the mouse's 'wee-bit housie', causing Burns to lament:

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion,
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion, which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor earth-born companion.

Burns' vision is not so different from the Routleys'. Prospects drear remain, some old, some new: pollution, global warming, loss of species, poverty and inhumanity are our familiars. They recur in Australia, as elsewhere, as periods of social regression replace what the rationalists of Burn's time would have seen as periods of social and moral progress. While any realistic discourse has to recognise the reality of the prospects drear, they are not inevitable and their weight should not depress us into passivity.

Hopeful prospect

Action creates the hopeful prospect. We plant a tree and hope that it may thrive and that people will enjoy it. We think how useful its timber will be, or of the money we will make, or how it will heal a ravaged place. We plant a tree for a fallen soldier or a new baby and not only hope for a more peaceful, pleasant world, but do something to create it. We seek the hopeful prospect. We have to confront the prospect drear, listen to the specialists, and collectively take the comprehensive scenic prospect in casting a future.

Parameters

The context in which we should cast the prospects for Australian plantations now differs markedly from the context of the FORWOOD and 1989 conferences. I would like to canvass four significant parameters.

Globalisation

Although ‘globalisation’ means different things to different people, it conveniently gathers some of the trends in the Australian forest and plantation sector. Market trends are obviously important but we usually shy away from the equally important but controversial issues of ownership and control. At the time of the last conference, forest products manufacturing was mostly Australian owned. Now a significant proportion is foreign owned. Even more remarkable is direct foreign investment in plantations. We might ask, how will globalisation affect our prospects?

New forest economy

Truly global economic effects will be created through climate change. From this has come the idea that a new forest economy might emerge from trading credits for carbon — although this is largely speculative until the Kyoto Protocol or a similar instrument becomes internationally effective. In Australia, carbon trading might be extended to trading credits for salinity or biodiversity. However, there is an intriguing paradox: credits, as the alternative to regulation, exist only by regulation. Will they last if governments change? Will a new forest economy shape our prospects?

Neo-liberalism, privatisation and the role of the state

The present political setting is quite different from that in 1989. The shift to the right, the push for a smaller state and the privatisation of State enterprises have special consequences for our forest and plantations sector, which developed primarily in State institutions. Now some have been put into corporate structures and many have already been privatised: only one-half of Australia’s plantations are publicly owned. Will the present political setting brighten or dim our prospects?

Rural institutions

Although economic and institutional reform has helped Australia become wealthier, the benefits have been distributed inequitably and unevenly. Concurrently, the environmental debate has expanded from individual problems to questions about whether what we do is sustainable in the long term. These sets of issues are sharply apparent in rural Australia. Governments and corporations have withdrawn services, the rift between rich and poor has deepened, youth unemployment and suicide rates are far higher than in the cities: the prospect drear.

The rise of the Landcare movement, the activities of Greening Australia and those initiated by the ‘2020 Vision’ have led to more planting on farms: the hopeful prospect. Industrial and investment plantations are also expanding rapidly with significant

economic and social effects in their regions. Will they develop or depress rural Australia?

Purposes

Last year we commemorated the centenary of Federation, and thought, with a mixture of pride and sorrow, about what we had achieved and failed to achieve, as a nation. One of Australia’s great achievements has been to create democratic and scientific cultures in which views and purposes can be openly discussed. We have well-established institutions: the Australian National University has existed for half the period Australia has been a nation, the Bureau of Rural Sciences is concerned with the national prospects for plantations, and Australian scientists publish their findings for the world at large. We have over a century of experience with State and corporate plantations, and have developed, to a very high order, the science and techniques for growing them. Until quite recently, however, there was little to be proud of on private farms and leasehold land, and even today national deforestation still greatly exceeds afforestation.

The two previous plantation conferences were directed to clear national purposes: FORWOOD was aimed at supplying the nation’s needs for timber; the 1989 conference discussed the national planting rate to either spare the native forests or to expand industry. The ‘2020 Vision’ too had a national purpose: to triple the area of plantations. With the benefit of hindsight, they seem strangely naïve. National purpose in the physical senses that it was understood by the earlier conferences has little meaning in our globalised and market-driven context.

We have to grapple with our more difficult situation in that the purposes of plantations are now more elaborate, and public policies are less direct or certain of their outcome. Purposes are particular to different growers: investment companies of various sorts; Australian industrial companies; foreign industrial companies; State enterprises; farmers; and so forth. Now the questions ‘for what purpose?’, ‘for whose benefit?’, and ‘to what public interest?’ have to be considered in relation to each component. Although the situation is more difficult, we need not lose the sense of national purpose. The hopeful prospect is created by determined action to overcome the prospect drear. We have to be analytical and critical in order to see what actions we can take. We have to weigh and interpret all the specialist depictions, but in the end we have to take the scenic prospect. We can be part of creating the long-term future for our common weal, our common wealth.

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