

Guest editorial

The forestry profession — can we learn from the past?

When I left the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) four years ago I promised myself that I would not become a vocal critic of my successors. This editorial aims to identify some of the factors that led to the displacement of the forestry profession from its dominant role in forest management and its loss of significant community support. My hope is it will help the new generation of foresters retain the pride that I felt (and continue to feel) in the profession, and see the opportunities that have been created for forestry in a politically 'green' world. I can understand the resentment felt by foresters who lived through the turbulent period that commenced in the early 1970s when the forests became the focus of an aggressive campaign by the radical component of the environmental movement.

There is no doubt that the role of the profession in the management of forests has been significantly reduced in all States with the exception of Tasmania. There is no question that if the profession was aiming to maintain the status quo, we lost the battle. It concerns me that retaining the status quo *was* the objective of some foresters who were part of the battle. The reality was that there was a 'harmonic convergence' of factors which meant that change was inevitable and, in my view, desirable. More importantly, there will continue to be changes in forest policy and administration and it is crucial that the new generation of foresters learns from past mistakes so that we can avoid the often diabolical process that we have been through over the last two decades.

If I had the temperament and time I would write the story of this period. Someone should — it would be a tragedy if it were repeated because the community was not aware of how destructive it was. Suffice it to say forestry agencies were subjected to numerous Federal and State Government reviews (my count is 30 in a 15-year period), continued restructuring (one State had 15 restructures and name changes over a 15-year period) and media attacks (CALM averaged one a week). The careers of a number of outstanding foresters were terminated with little thanks.

As Professor Julius Sumner Miller, a former television science personality, might have said, 'Why was it so?'. The profession adopted sustainability decades before it became a mantra in almost any conceivable human activity; the first foresters saved the forests from clearing; the forests in most States are refuges for many threatened plants and animals; a significant proportion of our fresh water comes from forests, some of which have been logged for over one hundred years; and so on.

There were many factors in the harmonic convergence that lined up against the forestry profession. I am not interested in

documenting how unfair our opposition was, because we can't change their tactics. However, we can try to understand why they were successful by observing how we handled the attacks and the changes that were occurring.

The forestry profession I entered when I graduated in 1966 was almost entirely employed in the government sector. It was strictly hierarchical, very inflexible, and gave lukewarm support to research. Timber production was a priority and forestry agencies did not make the timber companies pay even what it cost to produce the logs. Agencies were extremely territorial and less than sympathetic to many sectors of the community who wished to have a say in how the forests were used and managed. For example, when I first commenced my 15-year service on the Federal Standing Committee on Forestry I was taken aside by two senior members of 'the brotherhood' and told how dangerous was my advocacy of developing an industry based on growing commercial tree crops on privately-owned land.

Paradoxically, with very few exceptions, the profession was made up of people with integrity, commitment and superb land-management skills. They were also, with a few exceptions, 'good blokes' and invariably made a major community contribution to the country towns to which they were posted.

But they did not have the ability to communicate (marketing was a dirty word), and they were politically naïve. As the environmental debate over forests grew, the more enlightened States recognised the need to cater more comprehensively for the wider community and introduced the concept of 'multiple use'. I was also an advocate of this strategy. We thought all the users of the forest would be happy because they got at least part of what they had bid for. But the opposite occurred. Everybody was unhappy because they did not get all of what they wanted.

Consequently, although we believed (and I was convinced) that we were like Robin Hood, most of the community (with the assistance of the media who appeared to consider us easy targets) saw us as lackeys to the Sheriff of Nottingham. Our distaste for politics, combined with an unwillingness to understand the complexities of the post-Whitlam era, and an inexplicable failure to understand that in politics it is the numbers that count, made us political eunuchs.

Over the last four years, amongst other activities, I have been lecturing on environmental management and have been an observer of the new degree courses and the 'new' agencies that have replaced the traditional forestry agencies. I readily concede it is only now that I appreciate the excellent training I received as an undergraduate forester. In particular, our training was practical and covered a range of disciplines which made us

probably the only profession with the capacity to develop an integrated approach to land management. Deficiencies in the new degree courses on land management are, in part, made up for by the increasing diversity of students taking these courses, and their access to marketing and political training which we did not have.

The new agencies which have replaced the traditional forest services are not perfect, but they have a diversity of skills and a commitment to all users of the forests. The forestry profession

is no longer locked into government departments and, given its historical commitment to the long-term view, and its ability to develop practical integrated management skills related to all (not just forest) ecosystems, it has a unique role to play in resolving the major environmental problems confronting Australia.

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