

Guest editorial

The turn of the forestry wheel

The last 10–15 years have seen two of the most dramatic changes to Australian forestry since forest management by professionally trained foresters began 90-odd years ago.

The first has been the transfer of extensive areas of native forests from state forests to national parks. State governments have chalked this up as a political coup and it has brought satisfaction to those in the community who regard national parks as the highest form of land use. The change, however, has not been uniformly welcomed, and there have been social and economic downsides. For example, the contraction in permitted forest uses (notably the cessation of timber production and some other economic activities) has led to changed financial arrangements. Forest managers unable to generate revenue have been forced to compete with health, education, and law and order for finite treasury funds, generally without community support. This in turn has led to contractions in forest staff and some operations.

From the perspective of the forest, the tenure (i.e. state forest or national park) does not matter. What does matter is how the forests are managed.

This brings me to the second great change: the revolution in the administration of our public forests. In Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia the professionally-led forests departments or forestry commissions set up in the early years of the 20th century have disappeared. They have been replaced by a mish-mash of agencies concerned primarily with environmental protection and wildlife conservation. In some cases, as in Western Australia, the department is overseen by a community body (made up of non-foresters) responsible for forest policy and management plans. Administration of native forest timber production and plantations is the job of a small commercially-oriented agency with no land management responsibilities. Only in Tasmania does a government agency survive whose focus is solely forests and forestry.

These institutional changes have had many repercussions, reaching right down into the forest. One retrograde example has been the dissolution of the former system of forestry districts, each with its staff of professional foresters, field officers and forest workmen. The former forestry staff, who knew every track and tree in their patch, have been replaced by park rangers whose focus is management of people and recreation sites. The District Forester has become an environmental administrator in a remote regional centre, and forest management is only a small part of the job.

Another change has been the way in which forest management plans are developed. The former system was efficient and self-correcting because the people preparing the plans had to implement them. This has been replaced by a new juggernaut process based on 'stakeholder analysis'. This involves public

consultations, draft documents, workshops, interstate consultants, re-consultation, final plans, ministerial appeals and decisions. A simple management plan for a patch of bush can take five years to prepare, and even then the final document is more about pressure group appeasement than providing a blueprint for action.

The most serious changes associated with the new agencies are philosophical and cultural. In the new agencies, forests and forestry are no longer the heart and soul of the business or a life-consuming passion. Their responsibilities are immense and complex. Moreover, the upper echelons rarely consist of staff who have actually worked in the bush. It is now almost unknown for departmental senior staff to have cut their teeth as young officers running a remote forest district, defending their patch from fires, regenerating cutover bush or carrying out silvicultural research. Nor have they learned what it is like to live in, come to understand, and contribute to life in a small rural community. In a modern bureaucracy, the name of the game is political survival.

Is the new approach to forest management working? By this I mean are our forests in better shape now than 10–15 years ago? My view is that they are not, one indicator being the extensive crown decline in the once-beautiful and healthy wandoo and tuart forests, and elsewhere. Just as dramatic has been the deterioration in the standard of bushfire management, a fundamental requirement for forest conservation in Australia.

Although no government or agency will admit it, bushfire management in Australian forests is now at a new low point. The number and size of high-intensity forest fires clearly shows how badly things are going. In south-eastern and south-western Australia there have been large and damaging forest fires every summer for several years now. To some extent this is a result of the de-staffing of the bush — the loss of experienced foresters and agency firefighters who were once found in every forest district, and their associates in the timber industry. There are also problems in the forest, such as failure to maintain access for firefighters (indeed in some cases the deliberate closure of access and fire trails), constraints on the use of bulldozers for fireline construction, and the new health and safety concept that firefighters should not be put into dangerous situations. But the most troubling aspect is the philosophical change our new forest managers have introduced. This has been to move away from preparedness and damage mitigation (including effective programs of fuel reduction burning) in favour of suppression as the key approach to bushfire control. The 2006/2007 fires in Victoria have demonstrated that firefighting in forests with heavy fuels is a task which exceeds the resources of the whole nation, even with international assistance. Yet the drip torch is being replaced by the aerial water bomber and the mild prescribed burn by the stand-replacement holocaust. In fact this 'new' philosophy

(which denies Aboriginal burning and rejects the value of prescribed burning) is not new at all. It is a repetition of a strategy which failed dramatically in the USA, and also failed in Australian forests when it was attempted here prior to the 1950s ... another corporate memory lost when the old forestry departments were replaced.

One of the things that most dismays me is that the new forest managers no longer seem to understand that fuel reduction burning in forests also provides less dangerous conditions for firefighters and a higher level of bushfire safety for the wider community. Unstoppable wildfires originating deep in long-unburnt forests have now become the principal threat to firefighter's lives and community assets right across Australia's south-east and south-west. Furthermore, a policy of fighting forest fires only when they leave the forest increases the burden of firefighting on volunteers and part-time firefighters.

My heart bleeds for the small cadre of experienced foresters left in our forest management agencies who understand all this, but whose voices are no longer heard or who are overridden by the environmental protection and the health-and-safety experts. And I despair of those who blame bushfire problems on global warming. If indeed the climate is becoming warmer and drier then it is even more imperative that effective programs of bushfire preparedness and damage mitigation are adopted.

The introduction of formal forest management to Australia and the creation of professionally-led and dedicated forestry agencies in the years around World War 1 were a response to the realisation that our native forests were in a sorry state. The early foresters did not get it all right from the start — many initially had a European attitude to fire, and some were seduced by the all-out suppression approach of the US Forest Service.

But a combination of burnt fingers, real-world experience, research into fire behaviour and a new understanding of the ecological role of fire in eucalypt forests saw an effective system of fire protection developed and implemented by the 1950s. Now the wheel has turned full circle, with our forest managers again taking their fire wisdom from European ecologists and United States firemen while our forests are being burnt and reburnt by uncontrollable high-intensity bushfires.

I am not arguing here for national parks to be changed back into state forests (although I confess I believe that the world needs more well-managed multiple-use forests rather than more national parks). My concerns are professional and concern the well-being of our native forests, whatever their tenure. A number of issues need to be addressed, but of these bushfire management is the most urgent. To achieve an acceptable standard, significant institutional, policy and philosophical changes are needed. These changes will not be initiated from within the agencies or come from the current state governments. It is, however, an issue in which the Institute of Foresters could and should play a leadership role.

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Intense, uncontrolled fires have damaged enormous areas of Australian forests in the last five years.