

ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT



CONTEXT

In Australia, forested landscapes are likely to have been actively and adaptively managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for over 60,000 years. The 1992 National Forest Policy Statement established the vision of achieving ecologically sustainable forest management of all of Australia's forests: public and private native forests and plantations; which requires maintaining ecological processes and biodiversity within forests and optimising the benefits to the community from all forest uses within ecological constraints. The United Nations Forest Instrument defines sustainable forest management as a dynamic and evolving concept that aims to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations. This requires analysis of data on all forest uses and values to determine a balanced but sustainable management regime for forests. At the national level, Australia uses the international Montréal Process Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management to measure how well our forests are being managed. At the local level, production forest managers can demonstrate sustainable forest management through accreditation and regular audits under independent internationally recognised forest certification systems. Likewise, the managers of protected and conserved forests can become certified under the IUCN Green List Standard thereby recognising that these areas are managed for people and nature in a fair and effective way.

FORESTRY AUSTRALIA ADVOCATES THE FOLLOWING:

- Ecologically sustainable forest management should be the primary objective for managing all forests regardless of land tenure, with its application and balancing of economic, social, cultural and environmental values determined by the nature and ownership of the forest.
- To guide future implementation of ecologically sustainable forest management, the 1992 National Forest Policy Statement needs to be reviewed and broadened to better address contemporary issues, such as climate change, biodiversity decline, forest restoration, forest product shortages and increased occurrence of bushfires. Regional Forest Agreements should be revised to provide an improved framework for the holistic management of all forest values across all land tenures within a region.
- The application and monitoring of ecologically sustainable forest management in Australia should continue to be consistent with internationally recognised principles, criteria and indicators, including those in the *Montréal Process for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests*; for which Australia is a signatory member.
- Ecologically sustainable forest management should continue to be underpinned by a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) conservation reserve network, complemented by conservation measures both within and outside protected and conserved areas.
- Ecologically sustainable forest management must recognise and respect the culture, knowledge and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In public native forests it should facilitate more meaningful partnerships with and leadership by Traditional Custodians enabling incorporation of traditional knowledge into decision making, use of Country for traditional cultural practices and protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- Under ecologically sustainable forest management, active management practices are required to maintain resilient and healthy forests that can withstand the impacts of threats including bushfires, invasive species and climate change. Guided by Traditional Custodians and forestry professionals, silvicultural practices which may include sustainable timber harvesting and ecological thinning of forests can enhance forest resilience and reduce the impacts of identified threats while maintaining water yield and productivity as well as biodiversity.
- Implementation of ecologically sustainable forest management is best managed by trained forestry and environment professionals, including those certified by Forestry Australia's Registered Forestry Professional (RPF) scheme, as well as Traditional Custodians.
- The application of internationally recognised forest management certification schemes, with applicable sustainable forest management and chain of custody standards and independent audits, is the best way to provide consumer confidence that forest products have been sourced from sustainably managed forests.

SUPPORTING NOTES

Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management is an internationally recognised term which describes an approach that aims to maintain ecological processes, preserve biological diversity and provide the full range of social, economic and environmental values of forests. Unfortunately, not all of the world's forests are managed in accordance with these principles.

Forests are dynamic ecosystems that undergo successional processes over time rather than existing permanently in one growth stage and species composition. Given ongoing threats to forests across all tenures, and the impacts of and interactions with human activity, passive management may not be the best way of protecting forests and ensuring that they remain healthy and resilient. Forest 'management'

POSITION STATEMENT

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includes thoughtful stewardship and interventions at the landscape and site levels, and 'ecologically sustainable' forest management includes implementing management processes to ensure that forest values and uses are maintained and enhanced over long periods of time.

Contemporary Australian approaches to ecologically sustainable forest management are consistent with the United Nations' definition and requirements and grounded in the long-standing national policies covering forests and the environment. Within this national framework, its application has been determined by the individual State and Territory governments, with private forest and plantation owners applying their own objectives within the arrangements set by governments.

The Montréal Process, which arose from the 1992 UN Earth Summit, has developed internationally agreed criteria and indicators for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests. Australia's national State of the Forests Report uses this international framework to periodically monitor and report data relevant to assessing performance against the principles of sustainable forest management. The data available for reporting against the Montréal Process criteria and indicators vary considerably between indicators and land tenure categories. The most comprehensive data is available for multiple use public forests, with less information available for formally protected and conserved areas. There are significant data gaps for leasehold and private forests.

Conservation of the full range of forest ecosystems and environmental values is fundamental to ecologically sustainable management. Under the 1992 National Forest Policy Statement, all Australian governments agreed that for native forests the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve network would be the primary mechanism to protect endangered and vulnerable flora and fauna species and communities, old growth forests and wilderness areas. The CAR reserves include dedicated reserves, such as National Parks, informal reserves, such as forest management zones, as well as areas protected by management prescription. Recognising that forested landscapes are dynamic and many threats operate across tenure boundaries, a whole-of-landscape approach for the conservation of environmental values is required, including conservation actions outside of the dedicated reserve system.

About 40 million hectares of Australia's forests are either owned or co-managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Forestry Australia considers that ecologically sustainable forest management systems in Australia should be broadened to support Indigenous led approaches and include matters that are important to Traditional Custodians including greater use of traditional cultural land management practices. Any such changes should be undertaken with the aims of achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and assisting with restoring

the health and resilience of Australia's native forests.

The success of ecologically sustainable forest management is fundamentally tied to ensuring there is adequate resourcing and ability to conduct cross-tenure, multi-value monitoring programs that are repeatable, implemented at appropriate scale and within useful timeframes to inform adaptive management practices. Setting aside native forests in formally protected and conserved areas with few resources to monitor and maintain the values that led to their reservation, can be contrary to the principles of ecologically sustainable forest management. Tenure boundaries do not guarantee protection of biodiversity, particularly from the broader threats of bushfires, invasive species, and climate change. Where natural ecosystems have been disturbed, or are at risk of anthropogenic impacts, active forest management is required to maintain or restore structural forest diversity and resilience and a capacity to recover from this range of threats. Also, actively managed forests can increase carbon stored in forest biomass, in soil and in harvested wood products.

Silviculture is the art and science of sustainably managing the establishment, growth, health and quality of forests. Silviculture includes natural and assisted regeneration practices, thinning for ecological or commercial benefits, timber harvesting practices and pest and disease control practices. Decisions on appropriate silvicultural treatments require consideration of the ecology and circumstances of each forest and its species, structure and its regeneration requirements.

Ecologically sustainable forest management can also be supported by forest certification schemes, which include two processes: forest management certification, which verifies that wood and non-wood products have been sourced from forests that are being managed sustainably, and; chain of custody certification, which enables tracking of products from the certified forest to the point of sale. In Australia, there are two internationally recognised forest certification schemes. The Responsible Wood certification scheme (part of the global Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification – PEFC) uses Australian Standards for both processes, and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification scheme uses its FSC Australia Forest Stewardship Standard, based on FSC's international principles and criteria. Under each certification scheme, independent auditors regularly audit the operations of certified certificate holders. About 11.4 million hectares of Australia's forests have been certified under these two forest certification schemes.

Demonstrating achievement of ecologically sustainable forest management is equally important for formally protected and conserved areas. IUCN's Green List Standard has seventeen criteria which collectively provide an international benchmark for quality that motivates improved performance and achievement of conservation objectives. Currently, there are four Australian conservation areas that are on the IUCN Green List.

Further reading

Montréal Process Working Group, 2017, The Montréal Process Strategic Documents. 27th Montréal Process Working Group Meeting – Nelson, New Zealand, November 2017. Viewed June 2023 <https://montreal-process.org/documents/strategic-docs/GuidetoMPstrategicDocuments.pdf>

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