

Managing places of social significance in State Forest

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ABSTRACT: During the RFA process many places of social significance were identified in State Forest in Tasmania. As a result of this process, it became abundantly clear that Tasmania's State Forests are highly prized by many community groups whose relationship with the forest varies from seeing it as the "life blood" of their community to others who value it as a vital recreational and tourism asset. More significantly, Tasmanians express their sense of "ownership" of State Forest and in many cases their alienation from National Parks, which has resulted from the introduction of park fees and restrictions on leisure activities such as horse riding or exercising the family dog.

In reality State Forest in Tasmania represents some of the most robust, varied and arguably most beautiful landscapes in the island. Unlike the fragile alpine plateau that forms much of the World Heritage Area, State Forest provides opportunities for recreation, including bush walking, horse riding, mountain bike riding and 4 wheel driving without threatening the environmental stability of these areas.

Places identified as socially significant range from favourite camping or picnic spots to entire sections of landscape that have historic links with the community often in terms of the timber or trapping industries dating back to the early 19th century.

Promotion of State Forest for recreational use poses obvious problems in terms of balancing harvesting with public access. In order to achieve this balance, we need to demonstrate our multiple use philosophy by maintaining open dialogue with the various user groups to encourage joint initiatives and a better understanding of the forest industry.

The key to finding the middle ground within the forestry debate is dependent on the inclusion of people in the theoretical "landscape". The media tends to represent "forestry" as a faceless juggernaut waging war on old growth forests where as in truth "forestry" is about people and their relationship to a primary resource. In the words of a Meander resident "the forest my grandfather harvested will be the forest that pays to educate my grandchildren in its turn." Increasing urbanisation has led to a separation between the resource and its end-users and as a consequence of this, the debate has become fuelled by emotion based on aesthetics with little understanding of the complex ecological systems and the process of harvest and renewal. Tasmania's forest industry and its pioneers have a long and fascinating history, which should be celebrated by all Tasmanians. Recognition should also be given to the industry that has come so far in terms of environmental management. The "good old days" were in fact anything but in terms of both human and forest resources. The future is clean, green and sustainable. The challenge is convincing the wider community that their forests are in safe hands.

1 MANAGING PLACES OF SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN STATE FOREST AND USING COMMUNITY LINKS TO BUILD A BETTER RELATIONSHIP

During the RFA process many places of social significance were identified in State forest in Tasmania. As a result of this process, it became abundantly clear that Tasmania's State forests are highly prized by many community groups whose relationship with the forest varies from seeing it as the economic "life blood" of their community to others who value it as a vital recreational and tourism resource. More significantly, Tasmanians express their sense of "ownership" of State forest and in many cases their alienation from National Parks, which has resulted from the introduction of park fees and restrictions on leisure activities such as horse riding or exercising the family dog.

In response to the growing debate concerning the management of publicly owned forests, Forestry Tasmania has employed a community liaison officer in each of its five districts. The primary role of these officers is to facilitate community partnerships, identify potential joint tourism initiatives and to engage community groups in open dialogue on issues relating to forest management on a regional basis.

In reality State forest in Tasmania represents some of the island's most robust, varied and arguably most beautiful landscapes. Unlike the fragile alpine plateau that forms much of the World Heritage Area, State forest provides opportunities for recreation including bush walking, horse riding, mountain bike riding and 4 wheel driving without threatening the environmental stability of these forests. Places identified as socially significant range from favourite camping or picnic spots and a network of multiple use trails to entire sections of landscape that have become regional icons.

40% of Tasmania's State forest including 86% of "old growth" is in permanent reserve and of the 60% managed for wood production many areas are excluded from harvesting through the special values component of the Forest Practices Code. Special values include the management of areas for landscape value, biodiversity, cultural heritage and amenity values (Forestry Tasmania 2003).

The promotion of State forest for recreational use poses obvious problems in terms of balancing harvesting with public access. In order to achieve this balance, there is a growing need to support a multiple use philosophy with open dialogue between Forestry Tasmania and the various user groups to encourage joint initiatives and a better understanding of the forest industry.

A good example of community participation has been the development of a community agreement with the Meander Resource Group at Meander near Deloraine in the State's north. Meander is a diverse community made up of traditional farming families, many of whom have had long-time links with the forestry industry and the operations of the local sawmill. More recently there has been an influx of new residents in the area who have moved into the picturesque Meander Valley in search of a peaceful lifestyle within a rural environment. Many of these people are craftsmen and bring a wide range of skills and experience to the valley. However, most do not have historic ties with the timber industry and are often openly critical of logging, seeing forestry as a threat to their environment.

"The Huntsman" constitutes an area of forest that provides the backdrop for the township of Meander nestled under The Great Western Tiers. The history of The Huntsman has been one of timber harvesting and renewal. Many local families relied on the timber industry for a living but also developed a great love for the area's aesthetic beauty and biodiversity. Features such as the Meander Falls, now part of the World Heritage Area, have long been identified as places of significant social value and the area continues to be managed for sustainable resource production and the protection of both landscape and biodiversity.

An agreement reached between members of the Meander community and Forestry Tasmania has resulted in the establishment of a picnic area complete with shelters, BBQ and toilet facilities, a series of short interpretive trails and a scenic lookout (Figure 1). More recently-arrived members of the local community have been encouraged to participate in the management of these recreational sites and have input into the development and maintenance of walking tracks in the area. It is hoped that they will eventually appreciate the sense of place and genuine passion for the environment often espoused by long-term local residents who have traditionally been seen as

"red necks" because of their involvement with the timber industry and their support for logging within the catchment.

The key to finding the middle ground within the forestry debate is dependent on the inclusion of people in the landscape. The media tends to represent "forestry" as a faceless juggernaut waging war on old growth forests whereas in truth "forestry" is about people and their relationship to a primary resource. In the words of a Meander local, "the forest my grandfather harvested will be the forest that pays to educate my grandchildren in its turn." Involving newer residents in the ongoing cycle of harvest and renewal is seen as the key to increased social harmony and a better understanding of forestry and the economic role it plays in the Meander Valley.



Figure 1. An example of the activities of the Meander Resource Management Group (author's photograph).

Forestry remains a highly controversial issue in Tasmania despite or perhaps because of the State's wealth of diverse forest types. From temperate rainforests to the dry blue gum forests of the East Coast, forested landscapes evoke the passions of many Tasmanians and visitors to the State alike. Forestry Tasmania has come under increasing pressure to manage the resource equitably for all Tasmanians balancing the needs of tourism and recreation in conjunction with sustainable timber production. One way of achieving some level of consensus has been to actively form community partnerships to both identify and manage recreational assets. Much of the negative response to the timber industry is created by "shock" responses to sudden changes in the landscape that result in people feeling disenfranchised. Involving communities in forest planning does much to ameliorate



Figure 2. Examples of the vegetation and topography of Dooley's track (Author's photographs).

this sense of “shock” and allows groups to retain their sense of “ownership” of State Forest. Similarly the development of the Tourism–Forestry Protocol has created an avenue for open dialogue between tourism operators and the forest industry to ensure that both industries may grow and prosper together.

The Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) has been criticised since its inception, however we are seeing more and more positive outcomes from agreements made with community based organisations. The Wilmot Trails Group, for example, has achieved enormous success opening up the historic Dooley’s Track along the Wilmot River (Figure 2). The group signed a community agreement with Forestry Tasmania in order to develop this riparian trail through State Forest. The success of this project and the spin-off in terms of employment and regional development represents a milestone in fostering community relations and cooperative management strategies. The local community identified the need for a low elevation riparian trail with resulting economic benefits for the area. During the 19th century, surveyor James Dooley developed the original pack route to service the gold mines on Black Bluff and to link the mines with the township of Forth (Denholm 1980). The trail was cut out in the mid-1800s and provided access to and from the mines for a number of years, before falling into disuse during the early 1900s as new road networks were built to accommodate motorised vehicles. Much of the original benching of Dooley’ Track remains intact and the route is still marked with blazed trees dating back over a century. Track work carried out by the Wilmot Group with help from Forestry Tasmania, Conservation Volunteers and Greencorps has resulted in a first class walking track. The group has also developed a parallel mountain bike and horse trail in places where the historic fabric of the original pack trail is too fragile to withstand the impact of multiple use. The partnership formed between Forestry Tasmania, the Wilmot Trails Group, the wider community and a range of organisations widely perceived as “green” has proved to be highly successful and has done much to break down philosophical barriers between conservationists, tourism operators and forestry.

Another example of community engagement has been the Borradaile Hut Joint Management Strategy (Figure 3). The hut is not only an important historic artefact but also a place of great social significance to the local community. Several families who are descendants of the original pioneers maintain close ties to the hut and the plain, including a grazing lease for their cattle. Ongoing management of the hut is shared between the lessees and Forestry Tasmania, who recently commissioned a conservation management plan (Brown and Cubit 2002) to identify the major risks to the longevity of the hut. One of the major risks identified concerned cattle rubbing on the hut and causing damage to the aging timbers and localised erosion around the footings. To remedy this situation Forestry Tasmania supplied split timber rails and the community provided the labour to erect a post and rail fence to exclude cattle. Forestry Tasmania also supplied soil, agricultural pipes and necessary machinery to ensure adequate drainage away from the footings of the hut and skin shed. In 2004/5 it is intended to replace the base-plates from the skin shed as these are rotting away due to the cattle pugging around the hut. Once again Forestry Tasmania and the lessees will adopt a cooperative approach for mutual benefit. Borradaile Hut represents one of the last trapper’s and snarer’s huts with its skin shed still intact. The technology used to smoke dry pelts is peculiar to Australia and to Tasmania in particular, where the wet maritime winters made the freeze-drying methods used in North America and Europe impracticable.

It is not only the management of State-owned forests that benefits from community input. Soft and hardwood plantations in Tasmania are fast becoming a highly-regarded recreational asset for endurance riding, mountain bike orienteering, motorcycle enduros and 4WD rallies. The good network of roads and tracks afforded by plantations are ideal for these recreational pursuits. Plantations do have the advantage of being generally recognised as a crop, thus reducing much of the angst caused by the perceived destruction of native forest during harvesting operations. Again the involvement of user groups has proven beneficial in providing information to the community and ensuring that a network of tracks is retained post-harvesting to maintain a recreational amenity for future events.



Figure 3. The historic Borradaile Hut (Author's photograph).

In some cases successful promotion of a recreational amenity creates a dilemma for forest management. Stoodley arboretum situated between Railton and Sheffield has become a treasured asset for the local community and visitors to the region. A portion of the original plantation was set aside during the 1930s in order to grow a number of trial species including Coastal redwoods, Douglas fir, Corsican pine, English beech, Tasmanian blue gum and *Pinus radiata*. The arboretum has since become a popular forest walk with access for horse riders and dog walkers. A 1939 planting of *Pinus radiata* now boasts the tallest *radiata* in Australia and the unique beech forest (*Fagus sylvatica*) attracts many visitors. Consequently this plantation has taken on historical, social and amenity values that rival the value of the timber. Future management of this amenity poses real issues in terms of balancing a high value crop of pines within the arboretum with the sense of community ownership. A management plan (Becker 2003) has been established to ensure that the arboretum will continue to be planted out with trial species to retain its historic integrity and provide the public with an on-going amenity with as little disruption as possible. It is hoped that community consultation prior to any harvesting activities will result in a positive outcome and an ongoing commitment to cooperative management.

Historically, forest management decisions have been made with little or no community consultation which, considering the sense of public ownership of State Forest demonstrated by regional communities in Tasmania, has often led to a feeling of uncertainty and resentment. The future of the industry relies on being able to win the support of the wider community and institutions that influence political decisions. Cooperative management of recreational assets provides an excellent forum for dialogue and helps to bridge the ideological gap between rural and urban communities.

2 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be recognised that “selling” the forestry message is not easy as the industry has allowed itself to be very much behind the eight ball where media sympathy is concerned. We must recognise that there are a percentage of people for whom forestry is anathema and there is little we can do to win their support. However the middle ground can be won by increased community participation and access to information. Most importantly, community partnerships provide an opportunity to work together for a common good. Forestry is essentially a green industry and should identify with the growing conservation ethic rather than be seen as “the opposition”. Increasing urbanisation has led to a separation between the resource and its end-users and as a consequence of this, the debate has become fuelled by emotion based primarily on aesthetics with little understanding of the complex ecological systems and the process of harvest and renewal. Tasmania’s forest industry and its pioneers have a long and fascinating history, which should be celebrated by all Tasmanians. Recognition should also be given to the industry that has come so far in terms of environmental management. The “good old days” were in fact anything but in terms of both human and forest resources. The future is clean, green and sustainable. The challenge is convincing the wider community that our forests are in safe hands.

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