

A forest conscienceness: Fifty years of change in Pemberton

Murray Johnson
Fine Woodcraft Gallery, Pemberton

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1 PEMBERTON IN MY BOYHOOD

I first came to the Pemberton area around 1960 as an eleven year old, as my uncle owned land on the south coast where his cattle were grazed in the summers. I can clearly recall travelling on roads where the karris met far above the thin strip of bitumen like a giant green natural cathedral, which went on for miles and miles. I remember sitting in the back seat of the car gazing upwards through the rear window in total awe until my neck hurt. Giant trees were plentiful then, and the structure of the karri forest was far more open than it is today.

School holidays throughout the year were eagerly anticipated, as my family often came south from my hometown of Geraldton to savor the cool and wet of the forests. My uncle had farming property near Boyup Brook, and his greatest love was an excuse to visit the coast at Cootamurru. At great physical effort, he had constructed the access track to his own patch of paradise, and I shared his joy and excitement whenever we entered the property. I remember fishing excursions which always ended with a bumpy trip back through the dark sandy tracks to the warmth and security of pressed tin walls and the old wood stove of Moore's hut. The Oregon timbers used to construct the building were floated through the surf from a ship safely beyond the breakers, and hauled to the site many years ago. We would walk to Lake Maringup with its wonderful stands of coastal karris and warren river cedars, where we often caught enormous marron, which were boiled up over a campfire for a succulent feast, eaten with our fingers. If we went out to inspect the property, we would enjoy a home killed steak for lunch, barbecued on the back of a spade, and accompanied by spuds in their jackets, raked out from the coals. I recall the Spring here where the peppermints and bullich trees on the walk to the lake were festooned with coral creeper, native wisteria and clematis in a dazzling red purple and white display. The coastal heath in spring was a carpet of spider orchids as far as I could see. I have not seen wildflowers as prolific since those days. The weather was very different then as well, with days of drizzling rain and the chance of a thunderstorm regardless of the season. These storms seem to have disappeared in present times, and the area is certainly much drier and hotter than it was when I first came down over 40 years ago.

2 COMING TO PEMBERTON IN THE 1980S

In retrospect, I developed a deep love for the karri forests of Pemberton from these childhood experiences. But it was not until 1984, when I was 35 years of age that I sold my home in Perth and moved to live permanently in Pemberton with my wife Lillian, where we purchased a small art and craft shop. In 1984, local tourism was in its infancy, with just 20 people employed in the industry, mostly newcomers to the area, and only two hectares of wine grapes were planted. There were 250 working at the sawmill, so Pemberton was then still very much a mill town. Local farming was based mainly on cattle and potatoes.

In contrast to this however, 1950 had been a very different scene. Pemberton was a major mill town of 3000 residents, with 1000 men working at the State sawmill. The mill ran three shifts a day, round the clock, six days a week. Steam driven equipment was still in use at that time, and the sawmill was the primary employer for the town. In 1962, the then Minister for Industrial Development, Charles Court, negotiated the sale of the State Sawmills to Hawker Siddeley Building Supplies Pty. Ltd., a British based company. It was agreed there were to be no retrenchments in the mill workforce for a year. It has been rumoured that the sale price paid to the Government for the State mills was a million pounds, and that there was a million pounds worth of wood and sawn timber in the stockpiles when the sale went through. If this is the case, then the mill sites, mill housing and concessions to the timber in the forests were effectively given away. However, we will never know for sure, as the sale agreement was decreed "not available for public scrutiny" for a 30 year period, and the document has since "disappeared".

Hawkers, in their first year as owners, targeted the Warren Block, which contained some of the finest karri forest ever assessed, and just one year and one day after purchasing the mills, they retrenched 160 workers at Pemberton. The company then embarked on a steady program of mechanization, a process that was continued by the subsequent purchasers of the mills, Bunnings, and later Wesfarmers. As a result of this mechanization process, the employment levels in the Pemberton mill fell from 1000 in 1962 to just 250 in 1984. Output of timber was not reduced, so the increase of company profits at the expense of labour, was clearly the driving force.

Huge sections of flawless karri timber in the form of mine guides, pit props and sleepers, sizes of timber which simply were no longer obtainable from the forests remaining in most other countries, were cut at the mill then sent away to feed a voracious export market. The karri forests were treated like a vast quarry.

I had come from the city with no real knowledge of forest management or logging practices, and my opinions were based on information supplied by The Department of Conservation and Land Management, known as CALM. I understood from this information that "46% of the karri forest was in reserves, and unavailable for logging", and felt that on the face of it, this seemed a fair balance. Then in 1985, there were "trials" commenced in the local area and the logging of road "reserves" was undertaken. I was incensed. How could forest be held in a reserve, and still logged?

3 AWARENESS

To find an explanation, I embarked on a study of CALM maps depicting the reserve system in the karri, and found that around half of the total area was indeed designated to be in "reserves", but I also found to my horror, that at least 70% of the designated reserve, was either not forest, being "woodland ecology", "lakes and inlets", "sand dunes" and the like, and of what forest actually existed in reserves, most of this had been either selectively logged, or clearfelled prior to its reservation. I felt robbed, lied to, cheated on and betrayed. I did not take kindly to being misled, especially by Government, as I had been employed in my last position in Perth, as a public servant, a position I considered to be one of trust.

Not long afterwards, in 1986, a nearby area of forest called the Hawke Block, long considered to be a "conservation of forest values area", was nominated to be included in the register of the

National Estate. Almost immediately after this nomination, a large area in the centre of the block was clearfelled.

It was at this point I put my heart and soul into the task of raising public awareness regarding the disappearance of our irreplaceable old growth forests, and I determined to approach the issue in an alternative and proactive manner. I spent the next year serving on an independent committee of enquiry into the many different forest values, where I wrote the section in the report which covered the tourism industry.

Now I had in 1984 purchased a craft shop with the registered trading name of "Fine Woodcraft", which was then selling souvenirs like gumnuts with wobbly eyes, dyed flowers stuck in gum nuts glued to slices of varnished banksia, and turned or carved wooden items to the tourists visiting the local area. This was not really a credible lobbying base to work from. By talking to these visitors from other parts of the world, and to the small handful of woodturners and carvers who supplied their works to the shop, I rapidly developed the clear understanding that the tourists came to Pemberton to see the magnificent old growth karri forests, and also that the wood used for crafting the items I sold was of a size, age and quality no longer obtainable in most other developed countries. It became very clear to me that old growth forests simply could never be regrown, and neither could we regrow the quality and sizes of wood my supplying artisans had the great privilege to be using.

This awareness led me to develop the idea that as a proactive and educational approach to conservation, and as an example of an alternative forest industry, I would base my business on selling works crafted from long dead forest floor salvaged wood, from logs deemed to be "unmillable" and rejected by the automated mills, or from forest species not considered to be of any value by the logging industry.

I began the process in 1985, and by 1986 had successfully negotiated the first "Craftwood Licences" in WA, which for the first time gave the artisans legal access to the dead wood on the forest floor. Prior to this the artisans had cut "firewood" which of course had ended up as crafted works.

4 FINE WOOD INDUSTRY

In 1986, I and a few others in the fledgling Fine Wood Industry, co-founded the Fine Woodwork Association of WA. At that same meeting, I proposed the idea WA should have a design based school of wood, to grow the industry from a professional base. The school was to have an attached "incubator", where graduates could move into a fully equipped workshop on an initial "peppercorn" rental, which increased over time, to allow the development of their products and markets, to prove a cash flow, which would then allow them to borrow to fund their own operation. This would grow the artisan base of the industry. The School of Wood now exists in Dwellingup, but the incubator does not. Students traditionally have little money, and a basic woodworking workshop capable of producing furniture is not cheap. The current level of graduates from the school of wood going on to work in the industry is only around 6%, so my original rationale for the school has not yet been realised.

In 1985, a Hungarian woodcraftsman, carver and furniture maker, Paul Molnar, who had escaped from Romania, then under dictatorial rule, leaving a wife and two young children behind, visited us. He had a few photographs and some hand tools, so based solely on our intuition, we decided to pay him wages to convert a series of tumble down sheds on our property into a woodcraft studio. We borrowed some funds from my wife's mother to purchase the required woodworking machinery, and set Paul up in business. We also set about getting his wife and children to Australia. Some six months later, Paul's family joined him in Pemberton. To obtain wood in Romania, Paul had to amass American cigarettes, bribe the local farm cooperative to access a vehicle, buy black market petrol, bribe the timber cutters, then have enough cigarettes left to bribe the police should he be stopped on the way home, as citizens in Romania had no legal access to timber. When he saw the dead wood lying everywhere around him in Pemberton, he was like a child in a sweet shop. His

first exquisitely carved jewellery boxes were crafted from wood literally taken from a local wood-heap.

We had also at that time been mentoring a woodturner from Balingup name Bruce Dye, and we were supporting his family by sales of his work through our tiny craft shop. Bruce was with me when the original Craftwood Licences were negotiated. After the negotiations, Bruce was casually asked by the CALM representative as to what lengths of wood he personally used. The 1.5 metre maximum length of wood later stipulated under these licences was based on the personal use of this one craftsman.

A vehicle breakdown in 1984 in Perth led us to meet a mechanic named Vaughn Richmond, who was then in his spare time making keyrings and paper knives. We encouraged him to take up woodturning, and immediately his flair and design became apparent.

We initiated and ran master classes from the workshop, using Paul and Vaughn, where craftsmen, like Pemberton based Peter Kovacsy, were given their inspiration and early role models. My idea was that to push for changes in attitude towards our precious remaining forest, while being openly critical of forest management, we had to pursue excellence and demonstrate a clear viable and professional alternative. Vaughn has since gone on to achieve international acclaim, and continues today to teach his craft to others.

5 CONFLICT OVER MANAGEMENT

While all this was going on, I found myself being asked to make comment on radio and television regarding the emerging conflict over forest management, or speaking at forest rallies. I also served as president of the Pemberton Tourist Centre in 1986, where my committee and I wrote the first of many submissions to Government with regard to forest management and the future needs of the tourism industry. We made the very valid point that just 4000 hectares of old growth forest around Pemberton in the only secure reserve classification of National Park, was a totally inadequate resource on which to grow our industry. This submission was singled out for a vitriolic personal response from the head of CALM, Dr, Syd Shea. It had clearly hit a nerve. I received personal threats as a result of my open criticism of forest management, my business was twice blockaded by log truck drivers, and was threatened with being burned down. All these reactions were engendered by misinformation given to the workers by the self-interested major timber industry. They only served to reinforce and encourage my views that radical change in forest management was essential in order to provide for the future needs of both the tourism and the fine wood industries.

6 SHIFTING ATTITUDES

What was clearly required was a shift from the existing quarry mentality to one of great respect and reverence for the wonderful and irreplaceable timbers we had the great fortune to have access to, but to overcome the clear hand in glove relationship between the major timber players and Government would require a strong public movement.

We purchased the equipment from a printing shop which closed down nearby, and then offered a design and print service to local businesses, while also starting an alternative local newspaper, where the editorial content was more open and community oriented. My wife Lillian produced the first 20 monthly editions of *The Paper*, which later went through a succession of owners and name changes over the next 12 years, and is now being produced by the Pemberton Telecentre. It is certain this publication was instrumental in the gradual shift in local attitude towards our forests, while the steady growth of local tourism supported the message of change in a visible and practical manner, by creating alternative employment for local people.

Local children leaving school were more able to stay in the area, and the wives of mill workers were finding employment in the growing hospitality and wine industry. More and more backpackers were soon being attracted to the area by the seasonal work opportunities presented by both

the growing wine industry, and the diversification of the horticultural industry, particularly avocados. There was a growing willingness among the town residents to converse with visitors to the town, and the old insular attitudes slowly started to dissolve.

The process has been gradual, and a 1994 regional study by the University of Western Australia Geography Department revealed that tourism had become the major employer industry in the combined towns of Pemberton, Northcliffe and Quin nip. The study also showed reluctance by respondents to reveal their true feelings regarding the forests, for fear of retribution from the timber industry. An orchestrated regime of fear had been a very effective way of suppressing any vocal opposition to the decimation of the local forests. Thankfully these attitudes have largely disappeared today.

7 PEMBERTON TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

Pemberton in 2004 has a diverse economy base, with tourism, wine and agriculture/horticulture the main drivers. 1500 hectares of wine grapes have been established, and a growing list of award winning wines has been produced from the region. Local tourism is an \$80 million a year industry, with over \$140 million invested and 250 full time people employed. Pemberton is considered to be Australia's finest avocado growing region. An export oriented local cooperative markets growing quantities of freshwater marron from the area, and the markets of Perth and South East Asia seek locally grown agricultural produce.

The Pemberton sawmill currently employs around 60 people. The locally owned and far more efficient small sawmills which once dotted the region have all been closed by changes to Government policy, and the old bushman knowledge pool associated with these mills is steadily being lost.

It is our business practice to personally visit our contributing artisans, and universal concern was growing regarding the future of our industry, so in 2001, I initiated a survey of the Fine Wood Industry. The survey received responses from as far as Geraldton in the north and Kalgoorlie to the east. The completed forms were returned to the Crafts Council of WA, where the results were collated. I now had a firm picture of the combined investment and production value of the industry, the species and volumes of wood used and the source of supply, as well as many comments regarding the widely held fears of the artisans as to their future. Based on the results of the survey, I wrote a discussion paper which clearly stated the future needs of the industry, and the forest management strategies and Government policies which will be required to provide the Fine Wood industry with a future.

The most critical fact established by the survey was that less than 10% of the fine wood products being produced by the industry, could still be crafted from the more rapidly grown and much less stable plantation or regrowth timbers. Without ongoing access to the slow growing, stable old growth native timbers, the Fine Wood industry simply has no future. I personally presented this discussion paper to The Premier's Department in Perth on 12 November 2001, where representatives from the Environment Ministry, CALM and The Forests Products Commission were also present. The paper has been widely endorsed by both conservation and fine wood groups and associations, yet despite repeated promises of "consultation", the Government has to date taken no action towards demonstrating their willingness to provide a resource to the Fine Wood industry.

The barriers to Government changes to forest management policy are clear to me. First, it is difficult to now admit that the long espoused "sustainable industry" label is in fact not true. Second, the old ingrained standards of wood assessment by the forest managers will be difficult to shift. And third, the close relationship between government and large timber industry would have to be broken.

However the facts are clear and undeniable. Western Australia has remaining, after only 180 odd years of white settlement, just 10% left of its original forest and woodland. We continue to burn vast quantities of irreplaceable old growth native timber in logging coupes and in the cleared mine sites of Alcoa, simply because these trees do not meet the standards of the major timber industry player, Sotico, a Wesfarmers subsidiary. The silicone smelter at Kemerton near Bunbury

consumes annually enough old growth jarrah to supply the entire Fine Wood Industry in Western Australia for 15 to 20 years.

It is easy to obtain a licence to cut old growth wood in the forest for firewood, but virtually impossible to obtain a workable licence to cut craftwood. Huge volumes of native timber are simply cut, dried and then exported, allowing other countries to value add our irreplaceable timber. We are simply exporting jobs, and the old entrenched quarry mentality prevails. I recently had a British visitor to the gallery, who worked in the sawmilling industry in UK 40 years ago. Western Australia was at that time exporting our finest quality Jarrah to UK as "railway sleepers". When 100 sleepers were ordered, we generously sent 120, just in case any were to split during the journey. On their arrival in UK, the sleepers were milled into planks and the timber was dried. It was then re-named "Mahogany", and sold at vast profit to the Italian furniture industry. Nothing has really changed today.

Over the years, as the voices of protest had become louder, and the confrontations between the forest protesters and the loggers became more publicized, the management of our native forests was thrust firmly onto the political stage. With an election looming, the current Western Australian Labor Party rode the popular wave of opinion and was elected on a promise to stop old growth forest logging. Pemberton's tourism future was assured by this change of politics, as there are now some 40,000 hectares of old growth forest classified as National Park. This is a sufficiently large area, which will not be logged, to create the confidence to invest in and to develop the next direction for the town, ecotourism.

The reservation of more old growth forest is to be applauded, but it is clear to me this action also requires a total reassessment of how the vastly reduced remaining forest allocated to logging is to be managed. The current Government has clearly failed to do this. Governments continue think in three or four year terms and seem to have an ongoing paralysis towards changing management policies covering the logging of our remaining forest resources. The big players still get the cream of the product and the small players get the crumbs. The Fine Wood Industry currently seems too small to worry about at all and the incredible waste continues. What Government urgently requires is a major shift of consciousness, awareness that old growth forests cannot be regrown, and the realisation that wood of the quality we currently have access to is not repeatable. We need a revaluation of the remaining forest assets, taken in a world perspective; a shift from the quarry mentality which has prevailed for so long, to one of far higher value and sensitivity; and an entirely new management attitude based on the awareness that we have a commodity here, which was long ago, exhausted in most developed countries.

My wife Lillian and I have based our business on selling products crafted from what is regarded as the forest "waste". In 2003, we sold \$1 million dollars worth of this "waste" product, with a third of total sales sent to other states of Australia, and 40% exported worldwide, primarily furniture. Our gallery represents the some 300 Western Australian artisans, representing many different craft disciplines from jewellery, sculpture and ceramics to fibre works. In total we paid over \$1 million dollars to our contributing craftspeople for sales of their work through the gallery, and attracted some 20,000 visitors to Pemberton, generating far more financial benefits to the broader local community. My business combines the beauty of our native timbers with environmental sensitivity, high levels of craftsmanship and uniquely Australian design. Our market is the visitors who come to Pemberton to experience our old growth native forests. It is a symbiotic relationship and a workable and well proved model which could be much more widely applied.

The Venetian glass model is one which could be directly applied to what remains of our precious old growth native timbers in Australia. The Venetians have built a reputation for fine glasswork, and are intelligent enough to only sell the best of this work in Venice itself. By attracting the market to the source, the entire community benefits and their export dollars are exponentially multiplied, by additional local spending on accommodation, food and other travel costs. By not catering for a mass market, the impact on their raw resources is minimised, and the hand crafted quality of the work maintained, thus improving their already high reputation.

Western Australia already has a reputation internationally for our fine wood products, and with vision and the political will for change, we have a long and vibrant future. I am only one person,

but in 20 years I have had the great privilege to contribute in some way to changes in attitude regarding our native forests. Over these 20 years, I have witnessed a major shift in forest consciousness among the visitors to Pemberton, and a growing awareness from all ages and cultures of the incredible values these forests share with all of us. If only this consciousness could now be embraced by those in Government who decide the fate of our remaining forests.