

A regulator's perspective on the 'forestry peace talks'

Graham Wilkinson, Chief Forest Practices Officer



Tasmania's system of forest regulation is widely acknowledged as one of the most effective in the world. Our code of practice is used as a model throughout the Asia-Pacific region and tremendous interest continues to be shown in the way that our forest practices system delivers high quality planning and operational standards, backed up by leading edge research, monitoring and independent enforcement.

However, whilst our regulatory system continues to be a world leader, some of our overarching forest policies are clearly past their use-by date. The current upheaval in the forestry sector and the so-called 'forestry peace talks' are a sign that a fresh approach is needed to resolve the decades of bitter dispute about how we can best allocate the goods and services that society seeks from our public and private forests.

Society, of course, does not speak with one voice. Many people say that they don't object to the harvesting of native forests as such, but they do object to policies that allow intensive, industrial scale clearfelling with associated waste, smoke pollution and the poisoning of wildlife. They don't object to our native forest timbers being used for high quality construction products, furniture, veneers and boat-building, but they do object to our native forests being 'given away' as a cheap source of wood fibre.

'So why has the debate simply become one of locking up forests in more reserves, rather than an informed debate about how we manage our forests?'

So why has the debate simply become one of locking up forests in more reserves, rather than an informed debate about how we manage our forests? Part of the answer to this question is that the current peace talks are only focussed on the ideology and commercial interests of a small subset of

stakeholders. There is not yet a process of meaningful engagement with other key stakeholders such as private landowners, independent scientists, professional foresters, regulators and the public.

One thing that most people can agree on is the need for reserves. But what should be reserved and how much is enough?

The solution to the forestry debate is more complicated than simply transferring more 'high conservation value forests' into reserves, for a number of reasons:

- People have widely different perceptions of what 'high conservation value' means. For many it is a matter of science, for others it is more about philosophy or aesthetics. The reservation of tall, old growth forests is, quite legitimately, driven more by public veneration for their stately grandeur and longevity than their biodiversity value. In contrast, although dry forests and woodlands contain some of the highest priorities for biodiversity conservation, they have less public appeal as 'iconic forests' and as a result they are significantly under-reserved.
- High conservation values do not necessarily occur in large discrete tracts; they occur at vastly different scales in time and space within a mosaic of forests of different species, habitats and age classes. For example, mobile species such as eagles have large, but not necessarily homogenous, territories. In contrast, a threatened orchid may occur at a highly localised scale. Whilst some values can be mapped at a broad scale, many values are not even known to be present until detailed site assessments have been undertaken. Detailed site assessments have not been done across most forests and reserves. They are generally only done when a forest practices plan is being prepared in an area proposed for forest harvesting.
- The forest is a naturally dynamic

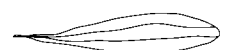
ecosystem, with species patterns, nesting sites etc. changing in response to natural disturbance regimes and ecological succession. Conservation values cannot be frozen in time. All forests have conservation value; a regrowth forest is simply a young forest that one day may become old growth and vice versa. Young forests contain species that do not occur in old growth forests and vice versa.

- Forests, especially those close to populated areas, need to be actively managed to control wildfires, pests, weeds, illegal wood cutting, hunting, rubbish dumping, grazing and erosion and to maintain roads, bridges and tracks etc. These management costs are subsidized by commercial activities in state and private forests but are transferred to the public purse when these forests are made into reserves. It is ironic that whilst the public may generally like the idea of more reserves, they generally don't like to pay the true cost of managing reserves through increased taxes or entry fees.

For these reasons, it is no more possible or practical to map all 'high conservation values' than it is to produce a definitive inventory of all life forms. Conservation values need to be managed within the landscape mosaic at multiple temporal and spatial scales using a combination of formal reserves, informal reserves and management prescriptions in areas outside of reserves.

'Tasmania's forests are increasingly at risk of being polarised into 'reserves' or 'intensive wood production' zones.'

Increased levels of forest reservation have in the past led to an intensification of wood production in remaining forests, with perverse outcomes for nature conservation.



A regulator's perspective on the 'forestry peace talks' (continued)

Put simply, Tasmania's forests are increasingly at risk of being polarised into 'reserves' or 'intensive wood production' zones.

However, the logic leading to this potential outcome is flawed: it assumes that society has the capacity to forgo the economic values of some forests whilst potentially forgoing the natural and cultural values of others. It falsely assumes that natural and cultural values can only be protected if the forests are reserved and that the values will be lost if harvesting occurs. It ignores the fact that over the last 25 years hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest have been harvested and regenerated under the forest practices system in a manner that has maintained natural and cultural values by way of informal reserves and appropriate management prescriptions.

'It falsely assumes that natural and cultural values can only be protected if the forests are reserved and that the values will be lost if harvesting occurs.'

A further polarisation of forests into 'reserves' and 'wood-production zones' could make it increasingly difficult for Tasmania to achieve sustainable forest management across all of its public and private forest estate. Declining public support for intensive harvesting regimes within native forests means that we should consider reducing the scale and intensity of harvesting, irrespective of any proportional reduction that may arise as a result of a reduction in the area of wood production forest. Any intensification of harvesting within wood production forests is likely to be in conflict with the requirements of the *Forest Practices Code*, the *Regional Forest Agreement* and certification standards.

The 'reserve it or lose it' mentality has serious implications for Tasmania's vast private forest estate. Private forest owners make an outstanding contribution to nature conservation under the current system of voluntary reserves and through management prescriptions under the forest practices system. These conservation outcomes are now under serious threat. Uncertainty about the future of resource use in native forests will push many

landowners to liquidate their assets in the short term by adopting more intensive harvesting or grazing systems and/or seeking to convert their forests to other forms of land use. This will put considerable pressure on government to either water down the current constraints on land clearing or face massive compensation claims and ongoing management costs if the land is to be 'protected' under the *Nature Conservation Act 2002*.

The debate about how much forest should be in reserves will never be fully resolved. Ultimately it is just a diversion from the more important debate about how we as a society can best sustain the services and values available from our native forest estate.

Placing more forest in reserves is part of the solution, but this will only be in the public interest if:

1. formal reservation is necessary to maintain those 'high conservation values' that cannot otherwise be sustainably managed by informal reserves and management prescriptions
2. society has the capacity and willingness to forgo the income and employment that are derived from the production of wood and is prepared to pay more fees or taxes for the management of additional reserves on public and private land
3. further reservation does not lead to an unacceptable intensification of wood production or forest conversion in areas outside of reserves, especially on private land.

It's time to seriously re-think whether the optimum outcomes for forests and people can be best achieved through a further dichotomy of forests into either reserves or intensive wood production. Lower-impact wood production across a larger estate may be a far better option than intensive wood production from a smaller estate.

'Lower-impact wood production across a larger estate may be a far better option than intensive wood production from a smaller estate.'

Tasmania's forest practices system provides an effective framework for identifying the natural and cultural values of the forest and for determining where and how wood production can be carried out in a manner that best sustains these values. The FPA, as an independent advisor, researcher and regulator, has a key role to play in the search for a sustainable future for our forests and for our forestry sector. The FPA:

- regulates forest practices across all tenures and has 25 years of expertise and experience in developing and implementing management prescriptions on public, large-scale industrial and small-scale private holdings
- has a team of scientists and specialists that provides an integrated approach to the planning and management of a range of natural and cultural values, including biodiversity, soils, water, geoheritage, visual landscape and cultural heritage
- has a team of 180 Forest Practices Officers employed throughout the public and private sectors, who are highly experienced in delivering forest management outcomes that are practical, commercially viable and environmentally sustainable
- conducts research and monitors the effectiveness of management actions, ensuring that management prescriptions are practical, effective and improved over time
- understands that sustainable forest management is best achieved through cooperation and partnership with land managers and other arms of government, backed up with fair and credible enforcement
- has expertise and knowledge in the identification of 'high conservation values' and in determining whether the values should be conserved by reservation or by management prescriptions.

Author's contact:

Graham.Wilkinson@fpa.tas.gov.au

Forest Practices News vol 10 no 4 April 2011

