

PUBLIC FORUMS ON THE ROLE OF FORESTS IN CLIMATE CHANGE Held in Bega (19 September) and Bermagui (20 September)

Around 130 people attended these very successful SERCA forums.

Speakers at the forum included:

Suzanne Foulkes who opened the forum with an eye-witness account of the impact of four decades of industrial logging on one ecosystem (the Murrah State Forest) in the Bermagui area. (See below)

Chris Allen followed with details of the distribution of koalas in the State Forests in the Bermagui area that have been obtained from recent surveys.

Margaret Blakers, from the Green Institute, highlighted the failure of Australia's National Carbon Accounting System to account properly for the 20% of total Australian emissions that result from deforestation (estimated to be 13%) and from the degradation of forest carbon through logging (estimated to be at least 7%).



Dr Judith Ajani, ANU economist and author of “The Forest Wars”, detailed the state of the total forest industry (plantation as well as native forest) that gives Australia an opportunity to:

- * get out of virtually all native forest logging in the South East of Australia
- * complete the transition to plantation-based industries
- * protect our old growth and our regrowth forests for their carbon, water and biodiversity values.

A message from Professor Brendan Mackey, co-author of the ANU report Green Carbon: the role of natural forests in carbon storage, was read out. (See below)

The Bega meeting passed the following resolution:

“Because native forests are so valuable as stores of carbon, government policies should stop encouraging their logging for woodchips and reject their burning to generate electricity.”

The Bermagui meeting overwhelmingly passed the following resolution:

“Because it has been proven that native forests are critical as stores of carbon, government must immediately legislate to halt logging of native forests for woodchips and reject burning of forest biomass to generate electricity.”

OPENING ADDRESS BY SUZANNE FOULKES TO THE SERCA FORUMS ON FORESTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

(Bega and Bermagui Sept 2008)

Thank you all for coming along and thanks to SERCA for organising this and inviting me



I am not a scientist but I would like to speak to you as an eye witness. An eye witness to the systematic destruction of a forest ecosystem and the waterways that run through it.

I have lived in Murrah State Forest for over 30 years. When we first went there we were besieged by wildlife. The abundance was just amazing. Nothing we planted survived the possums, wallabies, parrots. The bandicoots dug things up and the wombats caved in the best of fences. We kept bees at the time and the sugar gliders, several kinds, came in groups at the first sniff of honey, and the bush rats, mice and bats moved in. We could not leave the windows open in summer because of possums at night and goannas by day. The bird life was abundant and hugely varied.

The bush just hummed with life. The river had a stony bottom and lush aquatic plant life, small fish and deep pools with eels , redfin & bass and the native cray - the marron.

Sleeper and mine prop cutters had been through and there had been selective logging. We found huge old stumps. The integrity of the forest had survived these earlier incursions. They had been moderate.

Then came the logging for woodchips.

After only a short time the river began to silt up. It was gradual at first. Then after a heavy rain event massive amounts of soil came off the slopes. The logging went on relentlessly and the river just filled with sand, over the next 15 years.

There are no more deep pools and mostly the water is not even visible but runs under the sand which is all moving inevitably to the estuary.

The wildlife is now so diminished that a drive through the forest at 6 am will often not reveal a single living creature. The poisoning of wildlife after a coupe is logged to stop the regrowth being eaten has been very successful. The flocks of parrots that came in hundreds are now less than a dozen. We only rarely hear the owls and gliders at night.

The koala colony in the gully behind us vanished after their habitat was demolished by Forests NSW. Of course the follow up burning would have made certain. FNSW and DECC knew full well of the presence of those koalas.

Many eucalypt dependant species like potaroos, christmas beetles, and cicadas have also gone. The diversity of the forests tree species has been intentionally reduced to a virtual mono-culture of silver top ash and the highly volatile forest casuarina

This is a very sorry tale to tell and in the time frame of just 30 odd years. It is just a moment in the life of a great ecosystem. It is a modern tragedy and an environmental crime. This is the story of virtually all our coastal forests and water catchments.

So little is understood by government about our fragile and ancient forests. The mantra of sustainable harvesting by Forests NSW is simply laughable. The key to sustainable forestry is of course the soil. Any gardener can tell us that soil is the key. These ancient soils on one of Earth's driest continents have been changed in their chemistry by the greedy plundering of biomass and the repeated burning of any material which could replenish the vital nutrients .

The total failure to control erosion and siltation by current harvesting methods have guaranteed that healthy regeneration is not going to happen. The logging is on shorter and shorter rotations. The forests are now struggling to stay healthy and are full of highly volatile understorey weeds.

Dieback is rampant in forests that have been repeatedly logged and burned. Changes to soil chemistry are now being cited as a major contributor to dieback.

I can show you many dead trees along the floodplain of the Murrumbidgee River. They were thriving old mahogany gums hundreds of years old. They were left because they were too hard to get out. Having escaped the primary threat of logging they have succumbed to a secondary effect..... dieback. Forestry NSW have themselves acknowledged that dieback is a major threat to future yields (yields being the only way they view our forests) but they have in no way changed their practices. In fact the logging is more ruthless than ever before.

So little is understood by policy makers that the whole concept of 'waste' in our forests has come in to the discourse pretty well unchallenged, as though it had validity. Let me say that there is no waste in a forest ecosystem. Nature does not waste. Forestry NSW have been telling this big whopper for decades - that the timber used for pulping is 'waste'. We have all seen the log trucks taking these prime trees to the chip mill for export pulp, literally millions of them.

Trees standing in a forest appear to be doing nothing. What they are actually doing is transpiring rainwater, absorbing and storing huge amounts of CO2, housing and feeding multitudes of forest life forms, composting litter from their own leaves, conserving humidity under the canopy as a natural fire retardant and literally holding the earth together with their root systems. That sounds like a full time job. But no! By the industry's definition and government ignorance they are labelled "waste"

When the charcoal mill at Mogo was proposed FNSW set about poisoning thousands of healthy trees to feed into that mill . We were told that only "waste" would be turned to charcoal. We now understand that the definition of "waste" by FNSW is "any tree either standing up or lying down."

Now we have the threat of biomass 'waste' being used to generate electricity. The model for this has come from Scandinavia which has deciduous forests and dependable snowfalls. This model was simplistically laid over our dry ancient eucalypt landscape as though these ecosystems were in any way similar.

What has been overlooked here is that these Scandinavian forests have been altered radically by this industrialised plundering and are proving to be no more sustainable than ours are.

Dr David Lindenmayer, Professor of Environmental Studies at ANU has written about this and I quote: "It is clear that policy makers and forest managers in Australia have not learned from the mistakes made in many other countries and they appear to be oblivious to the problems that flow from intensive large scale industrial projects such as charcoal mills and power plants based on burning wood from native forests." "The fundamental issue of these schemes is not one of location but whether this sort of extensive and intensive use of the publicly owned estate should take place at all."

Local agencies and the Department of Environment and Conservation know full well there is a koala presence in the Bermagui compartments now targeted for logging from results of their own and independent surveys. Their credibility is at stake if they cannot stop this criminal destruction. Or is government just deaf to advice that does not willingly serve industry? Ten days ago a local man reported the presence of koalas in one of the targeted coupes. Good koala habitat is rare now and this logging will finish off Bermagui's koalas. But FNSW will push their harvesting plan through regardless, as they have done so often before.

In our own coastal and hinterland forests the Regional Forest Agreement still stands.

This is the obstacle to responsible, sustainable forestry management. The legal constraints within the RFA make prosecuting the breaches of harvesting obligations very difficult, but not impossible.

FNSW have the best and most expensive government lawyers in Sydney. They need them. The promised RFA review is now years late and this failure to review is itself a breach of the contract.

The unsustainable, unaccountable, unprofitable and all too often, illegal plunder that this agreement has allowed must stop. Community action, political pressure and solidarity has stopped logging before. Stick together and support the lawful resistance to this criminal vandalism.

Plague our Ministers with letters, phone calls and emails. There is a fresh new bunch of them just waiting to hear from us!

The Australian people have never been consulted on this issue. These forests are our national estate, they belong to us all.

Let them know at every level of government that we will not tolerate any more. Let Carmel Tebbut know we are here and that we demand environmental protection for our town's future.

We have a democratic right and a moral imperative to demand a halt to all native forest logging and a whole new approach to the management of our forests and their water catchments.

Make sure they have a future. Under current practices they do not.

MESSAGE FROM PROFESSOR BRENDAN MACKEY TO THE SERCA FORUMS ON FORESTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

(Bega and Bermagui Sept 2008)

Dear Forum Participants,

It is obvious to anyone who has walked through a natural eucalypt forest that it looks very different to a production forest. In particular, the structure is usually different with the natural forest having, among other things, a larger number of bigger and older trees. Our job as ecological scientists is to measure these differences and explain what they mean in terms of carbon. Our recent report (Green Carbon: the role of natural forests in carbon storage) used field data from 240 sites selected to sample south eastern Australian native eucalypt forests in their natural condition, i.e., excluding human land use impacts but including the effects of natural disturbances such as fire. Our analysis was based upon full carbon accounting and measured not just the carbon in the biomass of tree stems but also the carbon in the branches and roots, the dead biomass, and the soil. The results are therefore based on real data and are entirely consistent with other published values on the carbon stocks of intact natural forests.

To date, the policy debate around our natural forests has focussed on the conflict between their value as a source of cheap wood chips versus their biodiversity value. We have only just become to consider the ecosystem services they provide in terms of carbon storage and water supply. As an ecological scientist, I am trained to take an ecosystemic view of problems. Such a holistic perspective requires we consider the full range of forest values from a long term perspective. It is now clear that we will not solve the climate change problem unless we dramatically reduce emissions of greenhouse gases in all sectors. Globally, what we are doing to forests accounts for at least 20% of emissions. Therefore, avoiding emissions from deforestation and forest degradation is an unavoidable part of the solution to the climate change problem. Public forums such as these can make important contributions to the evolution of sensible climate change policies and mitigation responses. Good luck with your deliberations. - Brendan Mackey



Audience at Bermagui Forum