



# **WOMBAT FOREST SUBMISSION**

**TO VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT  
MINISTER COLMAN 9TH JANUARY 1995  
FROM LOCAL COMMUNITY DELEGATION  
NOTES FOR POINTS PRESENTED BY DAVID HOLMGREN**

*These notes cover a brief presentation I made in early 1995, to the State government minister responsible for the management of the Wombat Forest (64,000 ha) in our region which is primarily used for timber production. I was one of 5 presenters from a local community delegation representing concerns about over cutting and poor management of our public forests. My presentation drew on my then recent study tour which included European forestry as well as my experience in Landcare and farm forestry extension work.*

*The follow up letter to the minister's secretary was never sent because of concerns that it would not be useful in the strategy of co-operative liaison, which was being pursued by the local community. It reflects my views about forestry which were to be more practically applied at Fryers Forest in the following years.*

*In 1998 local conservation and saw milling groups signed an historic joint letter to the minister calling for reform of Wombat forest management. Since then, local Wombat Forest Society activist-researchers, Tim Anderson and Loris Duclos, have done ground breaking work exposing the massive over exploitation of our local forests as the pattern for the whole of Victoria during the 1990's.*



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Having recently returned from a six month teaching and study tour in Europe, I want to address two questions which should provide you with an outside perspective and context for considering the detailed and first hand knowledge of the Wombat Forest presented by Gary Mackintosh and other members of our delegation.

Those questions are;

Firstly,

- can the current forest management system in the Wombat be regarded as “world class” forestry?

and secondly,

- does the department’s management of the Wombat Forest have any credibility in the context of the very strong landcare ethic and movement within the Loddon Campaspe catchments?

I will present evidence based on my own experience and knowledge which shows the answer to both questions must be no.

My evidence will reinforce the importance of the Minister securing access to alternative sources of expertise in the field of forest management.

More specifically, my evidence will reinforce the urgency of addressing our community’s concerns, expressed at many public meetings and forest tours over recent years.

**Dealing with the first question of management of the Wombat being world class forestry.**

The current Shelterwood system of management achieves the first requirement of competent and sustainable forestry in generally achieving regeneration of primary timber species following logging.

This is commendable, but hardly a great achievement, given the relative ease of eucalypt regeneration when compared with other important managed hardwoods overseas such as oak and beech.

Following the successive logging phases of the Shelterwood system no silvicultural intervention (thinning) is done.

**This is contrary to the most basic precepts of the forestry profession.**

Thinning is fundamental to ensuring a high proportion of future wood volume is sawlog rather than low value products such as pulp and fuel wood.

In Europe, it is not uncommon for more labour and resource to be allocated to early intervention thinning than is used in ensuring regeneration or planting (in the case of failed regeneration).

The timber resource that is currently being harvested in the Wombat is a direct result of management systems during the first half of the century which did involve thinning.

You will be shown compelling evidence by Gary Mackintosh that the current harvesting system is actively destroying future sawlog values and that the best use is not being made of harvested wood.

What I want to emphasise is that the present system of harvesting is also producing new forests with less sawlog potential and more low value wood (ie. pulp and fuel wood).

The official position that forestry management is sawlog-driven has no credibility while there is no management to specifically grow sawlogs.

I acknowledge that ultimately conservation values will and must provide some brake on production levels from native forests. However, the Departmental position that current management represents the best balance between conservation and production values is absurd to anyone who has studied European hardwood forestry which generates massively higher returns while better protecting other forest values.

All of this is achieved with species which have lower growth rates requiring longer rotations, and greater complexity of regeneration and silviculture than our eucalypts.

Minister, I would like to present you with some data on hardwood forestry in Alsace in eastern France, supplied to me by a forest management contractor colleague who I stayed with on my recent study and teaching tour as an example of world class forestry.

Alsace mixed hardwood forests are managed on a 120-150 year rotation yielding 6-8m<sup>3</sup>/ha/annum of sawlog, pulp and firewood. 80 ha can provide a modest income for a family with 3-4% return on capital.

The cost of land with good existing forest is the greatest problem for any prospective forest owner (\$10,000-\$18,000/ha.) but community and state owned forests return a high dividend. Royalty returns on good forest are around \$300/m<sup>3</sup> average (pulp and firewood included). It is the very high returns from good quality sawlogs which give this high average price.

Total costs of management and harvesting are 25% of returns. Unmanaged forest (mostly very small private lots) will yield less than 3m<sup>3</sup>/ha/annum of total product.

From the experience of some of my colleagues, your department seems very reluctant to provide figures on costs and returns from the Wombat forest.

Based on the limited data which is made available, yields appear to be somewhere between 3-4m<sup>3</sup>/ha/annum returning an average of about \$12/m<sup>3</sup>.

This is not world class forestry!

The very strong feeling in our community that it is possible to achieve major improvements in conservation and production values through changes in the forest management system is strongly supported by the diverse examples of European hardwood forestry.

**The next question I want to address concerns the credibility of the Department within the Landcare community.**

As an educator and consultant I have enthusiastically promoted farm forestry as an environmentally and economically sound land use within the Loddon Campaspe catchments for 10 years.

Your Department has put increasing resources into farm forestry and agroforestry research and extension in recent years in line with the Timber Industry Strategy.

The Loddon Catchment Salinity Management Plan and the more recent Avoca-Loddon-Campaspe Regional Landcare Plan include recognition of the great potential for forestry and agroforestry to address salinity and other land degradation issues. (Recomm. 8.1-8.7 & 9.1-9.4).

Information provided to farmers by the government suggest yields of 15m<sup>3</sup>/ha/annum of pulp wood can be expected from hardwood plantations.

In our catchments, there have been spectacular increases in landcare tree planting by land holders in the northern low rainfall areas. But in the upland high rainfall parts near the Wombat forest, managed hardwood forests, planted or native, are conspicuous by their absence.

**I believe that the greatest impediment to the development of a healthy private hardwood forestry sector in our region is the poor example of “managed forestry” provided by the Department and the apparent low returns the public of Victoria receive from production forests.**

What astute farmer would consider hardwood forestry as a land use when the Department with its vast existing forest resources and “expertise” gets such a poor return per hectare and when there are serious doubts about whether forestry is environmentally sound?

Despite the example provided by the Department, a small but increasing number of land holders are becoming more knowledgeable and experienced about silviculture through managing their own diverse tree plantings.

These innovative farmers are natural leaders within rural communities. Their disgust at management of public forests is openly expressed within the landcare network.

The almost schizophrenic fronts presented by the Department on forestry is astonishing when viewed from outside. It seems that the revegetation and farm forestry sections of your Department exist in almost complete isolation from native forest management.

The greatest contribution you could make to Landcare in Victoria would be the reform of the public forest management. Our community would be united in support if you made a start in the Wombat.

The question I would like you to consider Minister, is if the department had to apply for Landcare funding for its management of the Wombat Forest, would you, or your Landcare advisors think it worthy?

Ray Page  
Office of Minister for Natural Resources  
232 Victoria Parade  
East Melbourne. 3002

15th January 1995

Dear Mr Page,

Thank you for the papers by Dr Attiwill which I have read with interest. As it happens I have a long standing (20 years) interest in the ecology of ash forests of South Eastern Australia and as long ago as 1980 was involved in leading forest walks with foresters and ecologists discussing origin, regeneration and management of these forests.

Although I disagree with Dr Attiwill on some critical points about origins and ecology of these forest, I am in broad agreement with his basic thesis that the ash forests are amenable to ecologically sustainable harvesting. Further I agree that some version of clear falling followed by fire may be the most appropriate system of harvesting and regenerating these forests.

I do not think it follows that such systems or their politically inspired adaptations (Shelterwood) are appropriate to the harvesting or regeneration of mixed species and age forests such as the Wombat. But even this point is not critical for me to discuss with you or the Minister.

What amazes me is that you have sent this paper at all, given my and our delegation's support for continued management of the Wombat forest for timber production. It disturbs me greatly to think that after all our efforts at clarity and precision with the Minister and yourself over two hours, that we may still have to be pigeon holed into one of two intellectually and morally bankrupt political camps of this 25 year debate.

The points which I presented to the Minister (enclosed) were intended to show that Victorian forest management is appalling when compared with European forestry from a production perspective.

The issue you and the Minister must deal with is this: The timber industry has the use of 1.3 million ha of public forest "available and suitable for sawlogs" (Timber Industry Strategy) which Attiwill shows is highly amenable to management and biologically productive (Ash forest has the highest measured volume increment for any natural forest in the world). It pays the lowest royalty rates for hardwood of anywhere in the developed world, uses the cheapest methods of harvesting known and yet its contribution to the Victorian economy as measured by value added wood use per capita is lower than comparable countries.

There are only a few factors which could account for this extraordinary situation:

1. Our hardwoods may be inferior as sawlogs compared with other major hardwood species used globally.
2. Our management of the forests is so incompetent that yield of sawlog is actually very low.
3. Collusion between a monopoly public producer and a collective monopoly of wood processors, to not pay Victorians a fair return for use of their forests, instead of effectively competing for market share with alternative materials.

Although a combination of 'cultural cringe' and lack of high quality value-adding in the past has led to a perception of inferiority of our hardwoods this is rapidly being replaced by an understanding that they are at least equal to hardwoods from other managed forests in Europe and N. America. The size and volume of sawlogs available to the local industry are larger than elsewhere in the developed world so it should be better able to compete than overseas processors of hardwood.

It is the second and third factors which are the main problems.

The lies and duplicity by state forestry departments in Tasmania, N.S.W. Victoria and W.A. over the last 25 years concerning the introduction and management of pulpwood harvesting in native forest makes it almost impossible to discuss the appropriate harvesting of pulpwood to improve standing forests without being associated with this discredited position.

The Minister's admission to us that he would not be changing the logging system because "there were (pulpwood) contracts to meet" was tacit admission that the forest management is pulpwood driven. Unfortunately, we all know it would be political suicide to admit this publicly so the lies must continue.

Twelve years ago, I made a decision that I was not going to waste my time on the reform of public forest management in this country which I felt was doomed to a downward spiral of short sighted utilisation and 'hands off' abandonment. I came to the conclusion that a sustainable forest culture in Australia would emerge from the private sector, especially from a hybridisation from elements of the old bush and new farm forestry interests. Through my teaching and design work I have attempted to assist the process and with limited personal resources invest in sustainable forest projects. Our community is one of the many places around Australia where this dynamic new culture is being born.

In the mid 1980's I used to say to people (especially environmentalists) that the management of the Wombat in the recent past (until the 1970's) was probably the closest we had in this country to good public sector forestry but that the current methods were

more dubious. However, it is only the growing concern from the people in our community who know the forest best (the men who have worked in it most of their lives) and the fragmentary data squeezed out of the department which has made me realise we are looking at a rape similar in magnitude and speed to that late last century. The conservators of one hundred years ago have become the cynical agents of private exploitation today.

Reluctantly, I have decided I have to add my efforts to saving what has also become my forest. But how we achieve that where other communities have failed, without succumbing to the divide and conquer methods of the departmental/industry hierarchy or the misguided energies of urban media-focussed mainstream conservation organisations is difficult, to say the least. It might not be politically astute to be as frank as this with a Minister's advisor but I want to see if you can really offer us anything useful and make it clear that we intend to learn from the mistakes of other communities.

The Minister's suggestion that our community should be more persistent in dealing with the foresters is actually offensive given:

- The persistent use of PR methods designed to manage the "ignorant public" by senior Department officers when dealing with people in our community who have forestry knowledge and expertise.
- The salaries senior foresters receive to do a job (provide leadership) which they are not doing and that community members (all earning their own livings, mostly less than our senior foresters) cannot put the time or resources in on a continuous basis.
- That foresters come and go with such rapidity that developing a working relationship with one can be a waste of time when they are moved to East Gippsland or head office.

I am not looking for a position on the FMA because I have seen very clearly the pattern (across many sectors and issues) of effective community activists being snowed under by professionals who run these committees. However, if the Minister can instruct your Department officers to change their methods and engage us in genuine dialogue then I would see that as at least constructive.

I await the Minister's reply to our submissions and look forward to constructive feedback from you.

Your faithfully,

David Holmgren