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# VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES: WHY DOES AUSTRALIA HAVE 'FOREST WARS'?

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## Abstract

The governance of Australia's forests has been highly contentious for 40 years, with many environmental conflicts between wood production and conservation that became known as 'forest wars'. Although much has been written during and about them, relatively little has been written about *why* they continue and *why* apparent resolutions do not hold in Australia while they do in some other countries. This paper introduces a brief history of the Australian forests from European settlement to the onset of environmental conflicts in the 1970s, and a brief history of the conflicts over pine plantations, the export of woodchips, rainforests and wilderness. Ten historically contingent and interacting factors that underpin forest wars are discussed: forestry, ecology, time, landscape and the rural divide, class, tenure, economy, philosophy, presentation and process. This paper offers another way of looking at an enduring problem.

Keywords: conflict, ecology, environment, environmental movement, forestry, governance, loggers, national parks, plantations, public policy, rainforests, state forests, wilderness, world heritage

## Prologue

In August 2016, yet another skirmish in Australia's long 'forest wars' started at Yabberup, a strung-out village in the forest and agricultural region of south-west Australia. Yabberup's 400 people have a hall, a tennis court and a community association, but no shop or school; work is hard to find and few people in their 20s and 30s stay there. It is surrounded by a forest rich in species whose spring wildflowers attract visitors from across the world. Its prized jarrah timber has been cut for decades; some still is, but not in the Wellington National Park that covers half the forest. A local group called Promote Preston started the skirmish when they launched their 'Imagine Greater Wellington National Park' campaign to double the

size of the park to 30,000 hectares.<sup>1</sup> They foresaw protecting its ecosystem, securing habitat for threatened species, increasing the number of visitors, creating tourism development and employment in the Preston Valley, and controlling the salinity of the water. The Institute of Foresters of Australia, the professional body representing past and present foresters, quickly rejected the idea because it foresaw increasing the risks of fire and weed infestation, and losing biodiversity, employment and firewood for local people.<sup>2</sup> With a state election due six months after the launch, the politicians took note. The local member, Mick Murray MLA, who was also the shadow Minister for Forestry, supported the proposal, while the Environment Minister, Albert Jacobs, recalled that when the whole area was rigorously assessed for its biodiversity and other values in 2001, some areas had been added to the park, but the areas now proposed were retained as state forest; in the government's eyes, the matter had been resolved.<sup>3</sup> In March 2017, the election was held, the Labor opposition became the government and the local group called on Mick Murray, now Minister for the Environment, to make good on his support.<sup>4</sup>

## Questioning

The Yabberup skirmish seemed familiar: there were opposing views of how the forest should be used, the resolution of an earlier conflict was challenged, and there were different interests, attitudes and styles in the challenge and response. Whether it develops into a full-scale conflict is yet to be seen, but I have observed such conflicts over the last 40 of my 60 years as a forester in Australia. They started to be called Australia's 'forest wars', although they were problems of governance, not arms.<sup>5</sup> It is surprising that although much has been written during and about them, little has been written about *why* they continue, *why* apparent resolutions do not hold.<sup>6</sup> The most recent and comprehensive review by Peter Kanowski comes nearest by identifying the historical phases of public policy and five themes in the failing 'legitimacy and durability of the policy processes and outcomes'.<sup>7</sup> The themes include failures of implementation, inclusion and regionalisation, but still leave my questions unanswered. If Austria or Slovenia or Switzerland or the Ukraine,

1 See [www.imaginegwnp.com](http://www.imaginegwnp.com), accessed 12 September 2016.

2 See [www.forestry.org.au/images/IFA/Media\\_Releases/Wellington\\_Nat\\_Park.pdf](http://www.forestry.org.au/images/IFA/Media_Releases/Wellington_Nat_Park.pdf), accessed 12 September 2016.

3 'Expansion Plans for Wellington National Park', *Collie Mail*, 30 August 2016; Letter, Hon. Albert Jacob MLA, Minister for Environment; Heritage to author, 5 October 2016, private correspondence.

4 *South Western Times*, 9 June 2017.

5 Maria Taylor produced the documentary video *The Forest Wars: the Fight for Coolangubra* (Dickson, ACT: Media Associates, 1995); Jennifer Andrew and Karen Malone, 'Forest Wars', *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 11 (1995): 163–4, [doi.org/10.1017/S0814062600003037](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0814062600003037); Senator Brian Greig, Hansard, Senate, 24 August 1999; Nigel Turvey, *Terania Creek Rainforest Wars* (Brisbane: Glass House Books, 2006); Judith Ajani, *The Forest Wars* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

6 For references to the literature, see footnotes 4, 7, 18 and 21.

7 Peter J. Kanowski, 'Australia's Forests: Contested Past, Tenure-driven Present, Uncertain Future', *Forest Policy and Economics* 77 (2017): 56–68, [doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2015.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2015.06.001).

for example, can govern their forests, apparently more or less stably and amicably, *why* is it such an intractable and unsettled issue in Australia? Some other countries have intractable problems, but my focus is on Australian questions. Is it inherent in the Australian national character? Or Australian forests? Or how they have been used? Or how values have changed? In this paper, I canvas some of the historical factors at work. My discussion is necessarily speculative and partly subjective because, although I draw on the forest history literature, I also draw on personal experience and observation. I make no claim to be definitive or comprehensive; rather, I offer another way of looking at an enduring problem.

A few points on the history of Australia's forests before the forest wars began need to be mentioned for those unfamiliar with its literature.<sup>8</sup> 'They hated trees' was how Keith Hancock captured the national character as the country was being settled, but there were always conflicting voices that objected to headlong deforestation and waste of timber.<sup>9</sup> As in other parts of the imperial world, botanists, scientists and foresters, and a few bureaucrats, sawmillers and politicians, advanced the idea of 'forest conservancy' and gained substantial newspaper coverage.<sup>10</sup> Their idea took formal shape with the Australian Forest League, founded in 1912 to advance the 'cause of forestry'.<sup>11</sup> Their interest was in the tall forests with their resources of timber. The colonial and (from 1901) state governments responsible for forests responded reluctantly with regulation and legislation and, from 1871, by reserving state forests and establishing distinct forest administrations to manage them. But progress was slow against political opposition from pastoralists and farmers, and bureaucratic

8 Australian forest history has mostly been written after the forest wars began. M. R. Jacobs, 'History of the Use and Abuse of Wooded Lands in Australia' (Presidential Address at the ANZAAS Congress, Dunedin, New Zealand, 1957), *Australian Journal of Science* 19 (1957): 132–9, is one of the few items published prior to the 1970s. National monographs include L. T. Carron, *A History of Forestry in Australia* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1985); John Dargavel, *Fashioning Australia's Forests* (Carlton, Vic.: Oxford University Press, 1995). There are several state forest histories, forest transport histories, journal articles and the conference proceedings of the Australian Forest History Society, formed in 1988.

9 W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: E. Benn, 1945), cited by Geoffrey Bolton as his memorable Chapter 4 heading in *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make Their Environment 1788–1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981). Warwick Frost has demonstrated that there were exceptions to this sweeping generalisation: 'Did They Really Hate Trees? Attitudes of Farmers, Tourists and Naturalists towards Nature in the Rainforests of Eastern Australia', *Environment and History* 8 (2002): 8–19, doi.org/10.3197/096734002129342576.

10 The imperial context of Australian forest development is covered by (among others) Gregory Allen Barton, *Empire forestry and the origins of environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); James Beattie, *Empire and environmental anxiety: Health, science, art and conservation in South Asia and Australasia, 1800–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), doi.org/10.1057/9780230309067; Richard Grove, *Green imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens, and the origins of environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and S. Ravi Rajan, *Modernizing nature: forestry and imperial eco-development 1800–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199277964.001.0001. Australian expression is shown by (among many others) Stephen Legg, 'Political Agitation for Forest Conservation: Victoria, 1860–1960', *International Review of Environmental History* 2 (2016): 7–33, doi.org/10.22459/IREH.02.2016.01; Libby Robin, *Building a Forest Conscience: An Historical Portrait of the Natural Resources Conservation League of Victoria* (Springvale South, Vic.: Natural Resources Conservation League, 1990).

11 W. Russell Grimwade, 'The Australian Forest League', *Empire Forestry Journal* 1 (1922): 66–8.

resistance from lands departments.<sup>12</sup> By the 1940s, each state had a small forest service and there were two government schools to train foresters.<sup>13</sup> After the Second World War, forestry was swept along with the country's post-war development: roads were driven to 'open up' remote forests and supply more wood to sawmills and the new paper mills; more plantations were established; staff was increased; fire protection, training, planning and research were expanded; and limited consultation was started between the Commonwealth (i.e. federal government) and the states and territories (hereafter, 'states') constitutionally responsible for forests.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the 1960s, and largely unnoticed by the public eye, the scientific and practical problems were being addressed energetically, and Australian forestry had a bright and optimistic air about it.

## The conflicts

To the foresters' great surprise, conflicts broke out quite suddenly in the 1970s in every forest region and in every government; some have lasted for 40 years, more may start. They are commonly placed in a chronology of worldwide and national changes marked by events such as the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (1972), the start of the Australian Heritage Commission (1975), the High Court case that prevented the Franklin River being dammed (1983) or the Brundtland *Our Common Future* report advocating sustainable development (1987). Within this general chronology, the Australian forest conflicts were triggered by rapid, large-scale developments, first to plant more pine trees, then by exporting wood as chips to Japan, and also by smaller operations to log rainforests and remote areas. Media labelled them under 'pines', 'woodchips', 'rainforests' and 'wilderness' headlines, but they were varied and overlapping.

The conflicts began in 1966 when the Commonwealth started to fund the states to plant more pines. To do so, the states doubled the rate at which they cleared some of their native forests. Plantations could produce more timber, but opponents argued that the native forests provided habitat for wildlife that should not be destroyed; moreover, so much of Australia's forests had already been cleared for agriculture that

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12 For example, the official Interstate Forestry Conference set an aim of having 24.5 million acres (9.9 million hectares) of land reserved as state forests that was not achieved until 1967.

13 They were the national Australian Forestry School and the Victorian School of Forestry: F. R. Moulds, 'Victorian School of Forestry: Forestry Education', in *Australia's Ever-changing Forests II*, ed. John Dargavel and Sue Feary (Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, The Australian National University, 1993), 129–33; L. T. Carron, *A Brief History of the Australian Forestry School* (Canberra: AFS Reunion 2000); John Dargavel, 'Contested Forestries, Contested Educations: a Centenary Reflection', *Australian Forestry* 74 (2012): 16–21, doi.org/10.1080/00049158.2012.10676381.

14 The ministerial Australian Forestry Council was established in 1965. In 1994, it was subsumed into the Ministerial Council on Forestry, Fisheries and Aquaculture that met independently or with New Zealand ministers.

pinus should not be planted on 'what remains of the bush'.<sup>15</sup> Such opposition spread through meetings, pamphlets, newspapers and so forth, and caught public attention with dramatic photos and headlines of 'biological deserts'. Other arguments about soil erosion and deterioration under the pines were tacked on and entered the national political agenda in 1972 during an inquiry into wildlife.<sup>16</sup> It took about 15 years, but by the mid-1980s the state governments had stopped clearing large areas of forests for plantations. Conflict took a social turn when the plantations replaced farms, but this gained less political traction.<sup>17</sup>

The states also started to 'clear-fell' (cutting all the trees in blocks or 'coupes') some of their coastal forests to supply wood to mills that exported it as woodchips.<sup>18</sup> The first mill, built near Eden in the south-east of New South Wales started to export in 1971, and was quickly followed by three in Tasmania and one in Western Australia in 1976. The speed and size of their five-fold expansion was extraordinary and the visual impacts dramatic. Opposition to clear-felling was based on similar grounds to that against clearing for plantations. A belligerent tone was set in 1973 by Richard and Val Routley in *The Fight for the Forests* when they stereotyped the foresters as being devious, hypocritical and secretive, and when they declared that the states' forest services had been 'captured' by the companies.<sup>19</sup> Individually, the foresters had long had various workday associations in the forest regions, and following the Depression of the 1930s they formed the loose Australian Timber Industry Stabilisation Conference with the sawmillers to see if better communication could achieve mutual benefits.<sup>20</sup> With the rising environmental critiques, the thoroughly miffed government foresters drew closer to the industry they had to regulate. Much of this was personal and local, but in 1974 they formed joint technical committees that reported to a national Forestry and Wood-based Industries Development (FORWOOD) Conference to advance their mutual interests.

Outside the state forests, extensive areas were being cleared, primarily for agriculture. The conflict over a large development scheme proposed for the woodland and heathland 'scrub' of the Little Desert area of western Victoria was a precursor of

15 Richard Routley and Val Routley, *Canberra Times*, 1 October 1971.

16 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation, *Report* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1972).

17 Jacki Schirmer and others have investigated this extensively. See, for example, Kathryn J. H. Williams and Jacki Schirmer, 'Understanding the relationship between social change and its impacts: The experience of rural land use change in south-eastern Australia', *Journal of Rural Studies* 28 (2012): 329–37.

18 Most these forests had been picked over for their sawlogs for decades. In clear-felling, most trees were sent to the woodchip mills, while any residual sawlogs were sent to sawmills. The conduct of the sorting process was often disputed.

19 Richard Routley and Val Routley, *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry* (Canberra: The Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1973). There were further and revised editions. From 1980, the authors were known as Richard Sylvan and Val Plumwood. John Dargavel, 'The Fight for the Forests in Retrospect and Prospect', *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 11 (2004): 237–44, doi.org/10.1080/14486563.2004.10648618.

20 Carron, *A History of Forestry*, 19; Dargavel, *Fashioning Australia's Forests*, 78–9.

the forest wars.<sup>21</sup> Individuals, scientists and conservation groups united in a 1969 campaign to conserve its flora and fauna in a national park. It was largely successful, leading to a reassessment of all the state's public lands, and demonstrated the political power of an organised movement. The environment movement grew rapidly in the 1970s as national, state, regional and local non-governmental groups were established. They took up the forest critique; rallies and protests abounded; the media showed ugly scenes that made 'woodchips' a byword for environmental devastation from which the forests had to be saved—else, where would the koalas live? State governments could not ignore it, but although they controlled the forests, the Commonwealth controlled exports and was drawn willy-nilly into the furore in a dozen federal and state inquiries.<sup>22</sup> There were two main outcomes. The forestry departments and companies improved their practices by keeping clear of streams or steep slopes, leaving occasional trees for habitat, and taking other measures. But this was a weary process of persuading loggers to mend their ways, and it was not until 1985 that Tasmania set up its Forest Practices Authority to administer a code of practice. Other states followed with similar arrangements.<sup>23</sup> The other outcome, often when an election was in the offing, was for state governments to turn some of their state forests into national parks. None of this satisfied the peak national body, the Australian Conservation Foundation, which in 1983 declared that 'wood production should be transferred out of native forests ... to plantations established outside the current forest estate'.<sup>24</sup> To the foresters, it implicitly denigrated everything they had been trying to do for a century. To the hardwood sawmillers, the pulp and paper companies, and the woodchip mills, it was a declaration of war. To their workers and loggers, it threatened their livelihoods.

Meanwhile, bulldozers were steadily pushing logging roads, place-by-place, ever further into remote mountainous and tropical regions as they had done for decades. What became the 'rainforest wars' was triggered in 1979 by a small community that had settled in the secluded valley of Terania Creek in northern New South Wales, surrounded by luxuriant forest.<sup>25</sup> The forestry department's logging plans would disrupt its peace and beauty, but when years of correspondence and representation failed, the community blocked the access road. The government called in the police, the protest gained media attention and environmental supporters flocked in from near and far. The initial skirmish blossomed into a full-scale conflict that spread to

21 Libby Robin, *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

22 Woodchips were included in 1974 as part of the Heritage Commission's inquiry into the National Estate. The next year, a national working group and a New South Wales inquiry reported. In 1977, a major Senate inquiry issued its comprehensive report, *Woodchips and the Environment* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1977).

23 Constance McDermott, Benjamin William Cashore and Peter Kanowski, *Global Environmental Forest Policies: An International Comparison* (London: Earthscan, 2010).

24 Australian Conservation Foundation, 'Forestry in Australia: Policy Statement no. 36', 10 July 1983.

25 Nigel Turvey, *Terania Creek: Rainforest Wars* (Brisbane: Glasshouse Books, 2006).

other areas. An inquiry reported that Terania Creek could be logged, but it did not assuage the objections. Finally, in 1982, the state government transferred six large areas of the most controversial rainforests into national parks, never to be logged, and in 1986 they were internationally registered as a World Heritage Area, thus giving the Commonwealth Government some oversight of their management.<sup>26</sup>

'Rainforests' became part of the environmental lexicon and opposition to their exploitation spread from the biologically profuse rainforests of tropical north Queensland to the chilly, 'cold temperate' rainforests of Tasmania. National surveys reported their limited area, their abundance of endemic species and put scientific substance behind the claims for their preservation free from human use. At the extreme, this freedom was captured in the public imagination by the slippery notion of 'wilderness' that was advanced politically by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (now the Wilderness Society), formed in 1976, and by earlier groups.<sup>27</sup> It took hold, definitions were devised and wilderness was mapped comfortably in government offices from satellite images.

The plight of Australia's wildlife was highlighted in 1966 when *The Great Extermination* was published, and was seen in international perspective in 1986 when the International Union for Conservation of Nature's *Red List of Threatened Animals* was first released.<sup>28</sup> The forests are home to endemic bats, birds, gliders and possums, one of which—Leadbeater's possum—epitomised the problems. This tiny, shy animal, weighing 150 g or so lives high in Victoria's tallest forests, which are also prized for their timber and prone to ravaging bushfires. For half a century it had been thought to be extinct, but in 1961 it was rediscovered and its small population and ecology was revealed by years of research.<sup>29</sup> Some reserves were made for it, but outside these its habitat was being reduced by logging, until 2009 when a severe bushfire destroyed nearly half of the habitat, leaving only an estimated 1,200 of these now critically endangered animals.<sup>30</sup> Although forestry plans were revised in 2014, opponents called

26 The constitutional power of the Commonwealth in World Heritage Areas was established in the Franklin Dam case in 1986.

27 The ambiguous nature of 'wilderness' is explored by William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 69–90, doi.org/10.2307/3985059.

28 Jock Marshall, ed., *The Great Extermination: A Guide to Australian Cupidity, Wickedness and Waste* (London: Heinemann, 1966); International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, *1986 IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals* (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, 1986).

29 The major research has been conducted and led by David Lindenmayer. His extensive publications include 'The Ecology and Habitat Requirements of Leadbeater's Possum' (PhD diss., The Australian National University, 1989); (with Hugh P. Possingham) *The Risk of Extinction: Ranking Management Options for Leadbeater's Possum using Viability Analysis* (Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, The Australian National University, 1994); (with Philip Gibbons) *Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia* (Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, 2002).

30 More recent assessments have reported some recovery of the population and the discovery of another population in the Otway Ranges. Hon. Lisa Meville MP, Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water, Victoria, 'Positive Progress for Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Efforts', press release, October 2017. In June 2017, the total number of animals was estimated to be 1,947: www.vicforests.com.au/leadbeaters-possum, accessed 28 August 2017.

for the entire habitat to be reserved within a far larger 'Greater Alpine National Park'. In the lead-up to a state election, it met a mix of valid and vituperative criticism from foresters and industries.

Clearly, Australia's forest wars are not over, nor are attempts to resolve them. Every state has tried inquiries, policies, suppression, amelioration, legislation, administrative reform and transfer to national parks. So did the Commonwealth, but its attempts also failed; spectacularly so in 1995 when 200 log trucks blockaded the national parliament. It was ludicrous that the cabinet of federal ministers even considered, and then could not settle, which coupes (small logging areas) in Tasmania should be set aside in reserves. Better governance was needed. Eventually, the Commonwealth and the states made a thorough assessment of all the values of the major Australian forests as a basis for 20-year, intergovernmental regional agreements.<sup>31</sup> In spite of marshalling the information available, commissioning surveys, extensive public consultation and lengthy negotiations over the agreements, the promise of this grand attempt was only partially realised: conflicts continue.<sup>32</sup> Why?

I argue that multiple factors must be considered. An example from Victoria shows the complexity of the issues. In 1970, in response to the Little Desert conflict mentioned earlier, the state radically changed its governance of how public land was allocated between state forests, national parks and other uses.<sup>33</sup> More land was put in national parks, but this did not address how the remaining state forests were to be managed and conflicts continued. In the new spirit of 'sustainable development', it launched a policy in 1986 that the economic viability of the timber industry and all the environmental and other values of the forests were to be secured for future generations through a process of detailed regional planning and extensive consultation. Conflicting demands were to be 'balanced' rationally and acceptably, or so it envisaged. The new policy was first applied in the Otway region. Three general points about the experience there can be noted.<sup>34</sup> The first is the multiplicity of the uses and values involved: 69 in the Otways, each requiring between one and 18 actions to be specified in the plan. Although there was well-established information about the wood resources, new surveys were needed about the flora, fauna, indigenous interests, cultural heritage and so forth. Second is the severe limit on the number of uses and values that can be balanced, or traded off, in any quantified

31 Catherine Mobbs, 'National Forest Policy and Regional Forest Agreement', in *Managing Australia's Environment*, Stephen Dovers and Su Wild River (Annadale, NSW: Federation Press, 2003): 90–114.

32 Stephen Dovers, 'The Australian Environmental Policy Agenda', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 22 (2013): 114–28, doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12013; Justine Lacey, Peter Edwards and Julian Lamont, 'Social Licence as Social Contract: Procedural Fairness and Forest Agreement-making in Australia', *Forestry* 89 (2016): 489–99, doi.org/10.1093/forestry/cpw027.

33 J. B. Dargavel and I. S. Ferguson, 'Forest land use conflicts in Victoria', *Australian Forestry* 37 (1974): 215–24, doi.org/10.1080/00049158.1974.10675613.

34 John Dargavel, J. Holden, R. P. Brinkman and B. J. Turner, 'Advanced Forest Planning: Reflections on the Otway Forest Management Planning Project', *Australian Forestry* 58 (1995): 23–30, doi.org/10.1080/00049158.1995.10674639.

or economic sense: wood resources, industrial employment and some of the water resources. Third is the existence of several political levels. Although the Otways plan was accepted in 1992 by the different regional interests, it was not accepted by the state-level combatants. Conflict continued. In 2005, after a state election, large areas of state forest were transferred to create the Greater Otway National Park, and the regional forest agreement that had been laboriously negotiated with the Commonwealth was not ratified. Then, in 2008, clear-felling in the few remaining areas of state forest was banned.

## Ten factors

I argue that 10 historically contingent factors underpin the origin, persistence and intractability of the forest wars, and no doubt others could be added. Although they are discussed individually here, none acted alone and their importance lies in their interaction, as discussed at the end of this paper. I have not included Indigenous interests within my 10 factors. Although they were recognised in government processes, they appear to have had only local effects in the forest wars considered in this paper (a totally different situation applies in woodlands and in Northern Australia).

1. Forestry
2. Ecology
3. Time
4. Landscape and the rural divide
5. Class
6. Tenure
7. Economy
8. Philosophy
9. Presentation
10. Process

### 1. Forestry

At the end of the 1960s, there was a rawness as well as an excitement about forestry in a country that was in many ways still being settled.<sup>35</sup> The foresters rightly felt that they were starting to make good progress, but they were still building the transport

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<sup>35</sup> Adapted from Stephen Dovers, ed., *Environmental History and Policy: Still Settling Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000).

infrastructure and they were still finding out how to manage 400 or so different types of forest spread across the continent. Some of the most basic knowledge was still poorly developed. For example, how much forest was there? Every state knew the legal area of its state forests, but their definitions of 'forest' differed, and neither their forests nor the lands departments knew much about the forest on private or leasehold land, and very little about the vast, scantily covered range lands or 'woodlands'.<sup>36</sup> The wood resources in natural forests are difficult to measure, but the basic tables to show the volume of wood in trees of different sizes had not been prepared for many of the important timber species, and little was known about the growth rate of most types of forest. Overall, the foresters could not yet plan to sustain the wood yields of the forests—their basic rationale—with any great confidence.

The foresters tried to find systems to manage the highly diverse tropical rainforests of Queensland. Probably nowhere in the world have foresters succeeded in doing so in a way that ensures that yields could be sustained in the long-term. Paradoxically, Queensland's well-established research programs might have yielded insights for the tropical forests of developing countries, but the research stopped when most of the Queensland rainforests were transferred to conservation reserves. However, attempts have been made recently to relocate and remeasure former experimental plots in order to monitor change.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. Ecology

The ecology of any forest requires deep study, but the foresters' knowledge was limited and partial, so they were at a loss at first when faced with the critiques over erosion, wildlife habitat and endangered species. They had focused on the trees and their wood resources, and their research was only starting to delve into the ecology of some of the high-value forests to see how new crops could be grown after logging.<sup>38</sup> Of course they had some knowledge of soil and many other aspects, particularly botany, but it was not comprehensive. In this, the foresters were not unusual, as ecology was only just becoming closely studied in Australia, marked for example by the start of the Ecological Society of Australia in 1959 and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) establishing its Division of Wildlife Research in 1962. What the foresters lacked the most was detailed knowledge about the arboreal wildlife, and even their casual knowledge was limited because much of the wildlife is nocturnal, when most foresters have gone home.

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36 Australian woodlands are now defined botanically as having trees under 10 m tall with less than 30 per cent canopy cover.

37 David Lamb, 'Long-term Ecological Monitoring and Institutional Memories', *Ecological Monitoring and Restoration* 18, no. 3 (2017): 1–5, doi.org/10.1111/emr.12271.

38 The first two major studies, by J. M. Gilbert and T. M. Cunningham, were sponsored by pulp and paper companies in the 1950s.

This was critical to the forest wars. Australia's rich arboreal fauna has an appeal to the popular imagination that extends beyond its scientific value. Many species rely on tree hollows for their homes, yet these only develop in very old trees, which are best removed for timber production. But they must be kept if the forests are to be managed for the wildlife as well as timber. How many? For how long? Can new hollows be 'grown' so that they will be ready when today's trees are long gone? These are difficult questions. For example, Leadbeater's possums make their homes in dry heads in trees 150 to perhaps 500 years old with an understorey of wattle (acacia). Although there has been more extensive research on this species than any other, how the forests they live in should be managed is highly contested, as mentioned earlier. Less research has been conducted on the many other Australian forest ecosystems.

### 3. Time

Time underlies the forest wars as much in forestry and ecology as it did in terms of social and political change. It caught the foresters in several ways. They had been the technical experts, the champions of forest conservation and, some felt, the proper authority on forest policy.<sup>39</sup> This was no longer automatically accepted in the 1970s as the public, and the environmental organisations increasingly, wanted to participate in major decisions.<sup>40</sup> It left the foresters' claim to authority exposed to the limitations of their knowledge about the forests and their ecology. Their more difficult problem was to demonstrate how their principle of sustained yield had been applied successfully in practice. They had good examples in plantations, but when it takes 100 years or more in the natural forests, they simply had not been going long enough. They could show what they were doing, not what they had done.

Their most intractable problem concerned the oldest, largest trees. Remarkable individual trees were often kept and admired, but the 'old-growth' forests carried resources to keep the sawmills going until new crops would be ready. Yet these were the forests of high ecological value that also carried cultural and scenic values, making the concept and perceptions of forest age scientifically and socially complex.<sup>41</sup> They became the focus of conflicts that, by the 1990s, resulted in large areas being kept in conservation reserves. Time for forestry and ecology is measured in decades and centuries, but in politics it is measured, election by election, in

39 The Commonwealth's first Director-General of Forests, C. E. Lane Poole (1885–1970) was the extreme exponent of this view: John Dargavel, *The Zealous Conservator: A Life of Charles Lane Poole* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2008).

40 Marked by the Victorian (1970) and Commonwealth (1974) Environmental Protection Acts.

41 John Dargavel, ed., *The Coming of Age: Forest Age and Heritage Values* (Canberra: Environment Australia, 1997) contains a series of papers, most of which are also in John Dargavel, ed., *Australia's Ever-changing Forests III: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Australian Forest History* (Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, The Australian National University, 1997).

three-year cycles with sharp eyes watching the often fine balances between the major parties. The differences in timescales affected the processes in which conflicts were handled by governments, as discussed later.

## 4. Landscape and the rural divide

The physical geography and history of the forest landscapes influenced the forest wars. Many forests are on steep, remote country that the agriculturalists had not wanted or reached; some had been logged for more than a century; while others were still unused and would be prized for their naturalness, even as wilderness. A few close to capital cities were well known, but most were known well only by the foresters and the people who worked in them or lived nearby. Groups of bushwalkers (hikers) had ventured into some from the 1930s, but from the 1960s more people had cars and holidays, public roads were getting better and the adventurous could try the expanding network of forest roads. As recreation became more important, forestry departments provided more picnic and scenic sites, but they could not hide the inherent ugliness of fresh logging sites. Foresters are, I think, largely blind to it. In their mind's eye, they see the handsome trees that will be maturing decades hence and are amply satisfied if they can see enough wee seedlings coming up to ensure it. However, for most people, the visual impact of clear-felling forests for woodchip exports was dramatic, especially in the early years for the mill near Eden and on the east coast of Tasmania. Familiar landscapes suddenly disappeared, while log trucks became too familiar on the roads. Whether this had any measurable impact on recreation and tourism is unknown, but it certainly provided ugly views for the media to display.<sup>42</sup>

Two-thirds of the Australian population now live in major cities and the days when many people could trace some family link to 'the bush' are gone.<sup>43</sup> The rural population has declined from 15 to 10 per cent since the forest wars started, but the trends for people working in the forest and timber industries were drastic. Investment in mechanisation and automation reduced employment, as in other rural industries, but the concentration of ownership and production in the native forest sawmills, combined with the shift to cutting most of the wood from plantations, meant that most of the remaining employment was in regional, not small, centres.<sup>44</sup> It is not clear how much the shift away from the native forests was due to the transfer

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42 Research on the environmental, including visual, impacts of clear-cutting is too extensive to review here; for a list of concerns, see Dargavel, *Fashioning Australia's Forests*, 164.

43 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *4102.0 Australian Social Trends, 2008*, [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4102.02008?OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4102.02008?OpenDocument), accessed 4 April 2017.

44 About 85 per cent of the logs were cut from the native forests in 1970, whereas 76 per cent were cut from plantations in 2010–11. Australia, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, *Australia's State of the Forests Report 2013*, [www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/sofr/sofr-2013](http://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/sofr/sofr-2013), accessed 4 April 2017.

of some forests to national parks, or to the inevitable result of having logged too much for too long, or due to economic preference for plantation wood. There were fewer places in which the forest industry was of local importance, which probably diminished its political importance.

## 5. Class

The combatants in the forest wars came from different socioeconomic classes across the deepening rural divide. On the natural forest side, the loggers and mill workers were pressed by the changes to the economy, structure and location of the industry, as well as by the environmental claims to the natural forests and their wood resources. They were virtually powerless to alter the former, but fiercely opposed the latter. Logging was conducted by contractors, many of whom were owner-operators; the fallers (tree fellers) were usually piece-workers; many of the log-truck drivers were owner-operators, while other drivers and loader operators could be on either wages or piece-work; union membership was low. Mill workers were employed by companies in the usual way and were generally unionised. Such differences did not prevent the loggers forming the Forest Protection Society in 1987 as an alliance that campaigned against the transfer of wood resources to national parks.<sup>45</sup> It presented a strongly local, small-business and independent image. On the industry side, the sawmillers had state associations to lobby for resources, counter the unions and lobby against the dominance of the large pulp and paper, and woodchip companies. Pressed by the environmental claims, they formed the National Association of Forest Industries in 1987. Apart from funding the Forest Protection Society, it adopted media and lobbying strategies, and attempted to denigrate or suppress alternative views. Interests differed between the defensive natural forest-based companies and the thriving plantation-based companies, which at times altered their alliance. The overall effect on the logging and industry sides was to divert attention away from the consequences of structural change and the over-commitment of forest resources. On the environmental movement side, the structure of national, regional, local and special topic non-governmental organisations, the 'alternative lifestyle' groups like that at Terania Creek, and political parties like the Greens and factions within others, generally sought to save the forests. Within this, their aims and strategies could vary significantly between groups, causing alliances to form and dissolve at times, while some acted independently. The movement's diverse members were largely urban-based, had a good secondary or tertiary education and drew their livelihoods from office or professional occupations. In this they were akin to company officials, the bureaucracy and the foresters, but not to the loggers or workers in the mills.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Renamed Timber Communities Australia in 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Ian Watson, *Fighting Over the Forests* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

## 6. Tenure

The tenure of forests varies considerably from country to country. The stark feature of Australia's is the complete denial of Indigenous rights at British settlement in 1788. Although some land rights have been restored, they have not applied to significant areas of the forest wars considered in this paper. Two-thirds of Australia's (tall, closed-canopy) forests are on state land managed by state agencies, which makes them more readily open to political action. Who controls them for what purpose is as much at question now as it was in the nineteenth century. The political conflicts over control played out in the state—and now also Commonwealth—parliaments for all to see are mirrored by less visible clashes between departments, in the very machinery of governance. But they also lurk in a contradiction deep within forestry. From the beginning, it had the conflicting tasks of regulating while also facilitating industrial wood supplies. The contradiction arose because most of the forest should be allowed to grow quietly to sustain its yields for the future, but it had to meet the industrialists' demands in an expanding economy. The foresters had a long history of trying to contain conflicts by asserting their principle of sustained yield, making long-term plans and issuing regulations, as well as by their administrative practices of allocating set quantities from particular areas, usually for three- to seven-year periods; but they were perpetually hassled by sawmillers, industry associations, local politicians and sometimes their own ministers to allow more wood to be cut than was prudent. Most of these conflicts were played out to variable results in rooms far from the public eye.

Now the question is state forest or national park? The usual means for taking action—argument, lobbying, media prominence and electioneering—are more intense now, while direct protests in the forests, policing and the occasional machinery sabotage or personal violence are new. But, in the end, the conflicts are still played out away from the public eye. For example, the extensive regional assessments and public consultations ended up in closed negotiations between Commonwealth and state governments for agreements that did not always succeed or last, as was the case for Victoria's Otway region, mentioned earlier.

## 7. Economy

Concurrent with the rise of interest in the environmental values of the natural forests, their relative economic value fell. Manufacturing as a whole slumped from 20 per cent of the national economy in the 1970s to 8 per cent by 2010; the forest industries only amounted to 6 per cent of that, while those drawing their resources directly from natural forests (rather than plantations) amounted to less than half

of even that.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the economic rationale of state forestry was increasingly questioned by the environmental movement on one side, and by the surge of neo-liberal ideas, and the associated ideas of public administration, on the other. Evaluating the merits of the economic questions is outside the scope of this paper. None gave much credence to the historical rationale for state forestry, and each imposed a business model that depicted the state forest services as running at a loss. The services were then variously merged with other agencies; divided into separate bodies for production and regulation; corporatised; or privatised, in the case of most of the state-owned plantations. Employment for the dispirited foresters fell, while university courses and forestry research bodies declined or closed. Overall, the economic questioning, repeated administrative reorganisation and declining relative economic importance of the forest industries reduced the political clout of Australian forestry.

## 8. Philosophy

The combatants carried different philosophies to the forest wars. They understood the world differently from one another, and often lacked a common understanding on which a satisfying resolution could rest. Here, I want to contrast the positions of loggers, foresters and environmentalists, from which there were many alternatives and variations. I ignore any claims that company apologists may offer to any philosophy beyond self-interest.

The loggers understood the forest intimately: they knew its scents and sounds and seasons; they knew it through their labour; and its geography was their past work. Theirs was a practical, experiential knowledge.<sup>48</sup> The foresters understood the forest scientifically, and could know it well, if not moved too frequently. Their knowledge was constructed to serve their management purpose, for, like the loggers, they carried a utilitarian philosophy, hedged with exceptions for this and that. Their philosophy was to sustain use.

The environmentalists were equipped with the distinct new field of environmental philosophy whose origin has been credited to Richard Routley, co-author of the 1973 book *Fight for the Forests*, mentioned earlier.<sup>49</sup> The field developed and diversified around the world with journals, books and university courses. Many

47 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *1301.0 Year Book Australia, 2012*, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1301.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1301.0), accessed 4 April 2017; Anthony Kryger, 'Manufacturing industry: A quick guide', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Library Research Paper*, 17 November 2014.

48 Watson, *Fighting Over the Forests*.

49 Dale Jamieson, in the preface to *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Hoboken, NY: Blackwell, 2003), wrote that: 'His [Richard Sylvan's] 1973 paper, "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?", originally presented to the Fifteenth World Congress of Philosophy, subsequently published under the name "Richard Routley," marked the beginning of a new field'.

environmentalists readily applied the ideas of deep ecology to their concern for the forests, and particularly to the vulnerable species that should have a right to exist beyond human needs. Such rights were in no way tradable, which put them beyond the reach of normal ways of resolving conflicts.

## 9. Presentation

The combatants clad their sides very differently when they spun their tales to the media in the forest wars. Each had scientific, economic and social information to support their cases with rational argument when needed, but for public persuasion they needed more. In this, the environmental side had the great media advantage of visual appeal. Who could resist a tiny possum's face appearing out of a tree hollow? Or the beauty of a mossy rock? Or the sadness of a huge stump? Such images were pervasive from press to postcards—that they could be specious was beside the point; they were persuasive.

On the forest side, the loggers could demonstrate their prowess in felling trees and hauling great logs, but this did not yield images as pervasive or potent in the public imagination. Nobody bought calendars of loggers. The forest industry had the financial advantage in being able to have offices and professional lobbyists at a level the environmental movement could never match. It presented itself as the defender of employment, in ways that were as specious as the appealing pictures and that were also persuasive.

As most foresters were public servants, they could not present themselves individually in the media. However, their association presented forestry as the historic saviour of forest against clearing. It generally took a pro-industry stance and opposed the extension of national parks—as in the cases of the Wellington, Otways and Alpine regions mentioned earlier.

## 10. Process

Much has been written about the policies and processes with which governments have attempted to resolve the intractable forest conflicts of the last 40 years.<sup>50</sup> The most obvious point is that governments applied substantial and increasing amounts of time and resources: the inquiries of the 1970s became more elaborate; the states reallocated their public land; the Commonwealth became increasingly involved in the 1980s, leading to the regional agreement process from the late 1990s.

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50 For recent articles with extensive referencing, see Kanowski, 'Australia's Forests'; Justine Lacey, Peter Edwards and Julian Lamant, 'Social Licence as Social Contract: Procedural Fairness and Forest Agreement-making in Australia', *Forestry* 89 (2016): 489–99, doi.org/10.1093/forestry/cpw027.

Once the critiques of forestry had started, the many uses and values of forests had to be accommodated across different administrative structures—mainly between productive and environmental agencies. Moreover, forests are also part of larger processes considered across agencies, particularly the mitigation of climate change. International agreements and obligations added to the complexity of inter-agency processes. Clearly, it is not for want of trying that some conflicts persist, start and restart.

All these policies, processes and administrative structures were set within Australia's electoral processes and federal structure, and are as much products of their idiosyncrasies as they are of thoughtful design. For those unfamiliar with the Australian system: the Commonwealth and the states (except Queensland and the two territories) have bicameral houses with single-member electorates in the lower houses (except Tasmania) and multi-member electorates in the upper houses; voting is compulsory and preferential. Although governments are formed from either of the major political parties (Labor or Liberal–National), minor political parties such as the Greens can have significant power, or occasionally join a government in coalition.<sup>51</sup> Nationally, the Green party in the Senate was a strong advocate of greater environmental protection, but the major effects of preferential voting on the forest wars occurred during state elections. To oversimplify the complexity of the voting patterns, it seems that the environmental movement gained considerable leverage through the way voters were expected to allocate their preferences. The major parties were often closely balanced in many, mostly urban, electorates, where promises to create more national parks were appealing. Promises to support the forest industry appealed largely in the fewer rural electorates, less likely to be affected by environmental preferences. Promises to create more parks were made by both major parties, but more often by the Labor Party, while promises to revoke parks were sometimes made by the Liberal–National Coalition. To these idiosyncrasies can be added factional and ideological disputes within the political parties and each of the combatant groups, all of which only made the resolution of conflicts more uncertain.

Some conflicts were resolved between the exhausted combatants themselves. For example, the regional agreement process dragged on in south-east Queensland until it was easier to collaborate. The industry knew it could not keep going as it was in the native forests anyway, and in 1999 agreed to shift to plantations.<sup>52</sup> The most fraught and long-lasting conflicts of Australia's forest wars occurred in Tasmania, where decades of apparent resolutions, supported by lavish Commonwealth

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51 Labor entered an accord with the Greens in Tasmania in 1989–90, and formed coalition governments with the Greens in the Australian Capital Territory in 2008, 2012 and 2016.

52 A. J. Brown, 'Collaborative Governance Versus Constitutional Politics: Decision Rules for Sustainability from Australia's South East Queensland Forest Agreement', *Environmental Science and Policy* 5 (2002): 19–32, doi.org/10.1016/S1462-9011(02)00022-9.

funding, had always failed, and most people were sick of hearing about them. Then circumstances changed because the demand for woodchips dropped and the major forest company, Gunns Limited, went into liquidation in 2013, its dream of building a large export pulp mill ended. It created the moment for a peace treaty between the environmental movement and the diminished forest industry and unions in 2012 that was endorsed by the state and Commonwealth governments the next year.<sup>53</sup> It provided funds for restructuring the industry and added about 400,000 hectares as conservation reserves, part of which the Commonwealth added to the World Heritage Area.<sup>54</sup> There was a bright and optimistic air about. If a resolution could be found in Tasmania, it could be found anywhere.

## Discussion

In this paper, I have argued that factors underlying Australia's forest wars need to be considered in order to investigate why the conflicts have continued so long. I discussed 10 of them, but others—market changes, gender or Indigenous rights, for example—could be added. The trajectories of individual conflicts involved mixtures of factors that historical studies, such as Nigel Turvey's or Ian Watson's, that draw on primary sources can uncover.<sup>55</sup> More such studies are needed to explore the relative and changing importance of particular factors.

Exploring relative importance might lead environmental historians to draw insights from policy studies, political ecology, historical geography and other fields. It is, I suggest, a rich field for their inquiries.

## Epilogue

In March 2017, yet another skirmish started on the opposite side of the continent from Yabberup, where this paper opened. The fiercer Tasmanian skirmish shared the same factors as Yabberup's, but not the surprising response. It was triggered by Guy Barnett, Tasmania's Minister for Resources, when he succeeded in getting his bill to allow logging in protected areas passed in the House of Assembly.<sup>56</sup> Most Tasmanians were probably more wearied than surprised by Barnett because the bright air of peace had already dimmed. The Liberal Party had promised to

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53 Graeme Wells, 'Tasmanian forestry peace deal only the beginning', *The Conversation*, 30 November 2012.

54 Commonwealth of Australia, *Gazette*, 5 August 2013, C2013G01198, 'Notice of Areas to be Added to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area in 2010, 2012 and 2013', [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013G01198](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013G01198), accessed 4 April 2017.

55 Turvey, *Terania Creek*; Watson, *Fighting Over the Forests*.

56 Parliament of Tasmania, Forestry (Unlocking Production Forests) Bill 2017, [www.parliament.tas.gov.au/bills/pdf/6\\_of\\_2017.pdf](http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/bills/pdf/6_of_2017.pdf), accessed 4 April 2017. At the time of writing (April 2017), it was unclear whether it would pass in the Legislative Council (upper house).

'tear up' the peace deal and once in government had rebadged the conservation reserves as 'Future Potential Production Forest Land'.<sup>57</sup> Its strike was surpassed by the Liberal–National Commonwealth Government that tried, unsuccessfully, to have the areas that had just been added to the Wilderness World Heritage Area removed.<sup>58</sup> Barnett's proposal was a deliberate provocation to resume a forest war ahead of a 2018 election. While the Labor opposition and the Greens predictably railed against it, the other responses were surprising.<sup>59</sup> The old industry combatants, having come to the agreement, seemed to want no part in another war.<sup>60</sup> Whether the political provocation will restart one there remains to be seen.

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57 Russell Warman, 'End of Tasmania's forest peace deal heralds more uncertainty', *The Conversation*, 29 August 2014.

58 Mathew Denham, 'Tasmanian forests a growing headache for Tony Abbott', *The Australian*, 27 June 2015.

59 Guy Barnett, Tasmanian Minister for Resources, 'Forestry legislation reaches final phase', press release, 17 March 2017; Australian Labor Party, 'Labor Party backs industry as Liberal plan lies in tatters', press release, 15 March 2017.

60 'Why reignite Tasmania's forest wars – to produce logs no one will buy?', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2017.

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