



Australia's forests: Contested past, tenure-driven present, uncertain future[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Australia's forests have been characterized by a history of contestation and conflict since British colonization in 1788. This paper adopts a “pathways to sustainability” approach to review Australia's forest governance models, which are strongly tenure-dependent, and generally vary between sub-national jurisdictions; only climate change-related policies, which are in a state of considerable flux, apply to all forests. Consequently, pathways to sustainability are defined largely in terms of the dominant purpose of particular tenures, and are now little-integrated across institutions, landscapes or tenures. Three decades of trialing devolved models of natural resource governance have effectively been abandoned, as have many of the initiatives intended to support development of a more diverse and more integrated ‘forestry’ sector. While the near-term prospects for sustainability of Australia's forests in anything more than the narrowest sense are poor, there are both knowledge-based and historical institutional foundations from which more substantive progress towards sustainability could be realized. This progress will need to be founded on approaches to policy development and implementation that recognize and accommodate the plurality of interests in forests, that enhance coordination and integration between institutions and across landscapes, and that empower and enable the diverse communities of interests in forests.

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1. Introduction, definitions and analytical framework

The governance and management of Australia's forests have been contested for much of the country's settler history, and manifested in a series of conflicts. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these were between Aboriginal Australians and the British colonists; in the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, between those advocating agricultural expansion and those seeking to conserve forests; since the early 1970s, between conservationists and foresters, about the management of native forests; around the turn of the 21st century, between plantation foresters, farmers and others in rural communities, about plantation expansion on farmland; and, particularly in the past decade, between some land managers and ecologists about appropriate strategies for bushfire risk reduction (see, for an overview, Dargavel, 1995; and other sources cited subsequently for specific aspects). There have also been periods of national consensus about aspects of forests, best embodied by “Landcare” in the late 20th century, but these have seldom been enduring (e.g. for Landcare, Tennent and Lockie, 2013; for public native forests, Musselwhite and Herath, 2005). The legacies of each of these conflicts continue to frame stakeholder perspectives and positions, and discourses and policies about Australia's forests and their governance and management, and thus to shape both models of forest

governance and associated “pathways to sustainability” (sensu Leach et al., 2010a, 2010b; Beland-Lindahl et al., 2017—in this issue).

In this paper, as in this Special Issue, “governance” is defined broadly, following Peters and Pierre (2005) as focusing on strategic tasks such as goal and direction setting, incorporating accountability, and encompassing both political and institutional processes (Leach et al., 2010a). In this Special Issue, a “forest governance model” is defined as:

“country specific combinations of various components of objectives, norms, policy tools and management methods guiding policy-makers, managers and land owners in the governance and management of forest. The model also sets out the overarching objectives of how to use forest land for the purpose of conservation, multiple use and production.” (Beland-Lindahl et al., 2017—in this issue; Sandström et al., 2017—in this issue)

Sustainability is interpreted generally in the terms first popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), and “pathways to sustainability” as “possible trajectories for knowledge, interventions and change which prioritize different goals, values and functions [towards sustainability]” (Leach et al., 2010b, p5). Frame analysis (Perri 6, 2005; Schön and Rhein, 1994) is used as one way to explore the perceptions and understandings of relevant actor groups, and their policy implications; a particular framing of issues promotes a specific agenda and way of action, i.e., a pathway (for a more detailed description, see Beland-Lindahl et al., 2017—in this issue).

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This paper first briefly overviews Australia's forests and of the evolution of their governance and management, including the roles of different actor groups; it next summarizes and discusses Australia's forest governance models and their implementation; and then draws on the operationalized analytical framework as presented by Sandström et al. (in this issue) to characterize the pathways to sustainability evident for Australia's forests, and consider their implications.

2. Australia's forests – type, tenure and ecology

Australia, popularly characterized as 'a wide brown land' (MacKellar, 1934), is the least-forested continent other than Antarctica, but its national forest extent of c. 125 M ha nevertheless ranks 7th globally (FAO, 2010). 123 M ha of Australia's forests are 'native' (syn. 'natural'), of which 75% are dominated by eucalypts (Montreal Process implementation Group, 2013). Two-thirds are woodlands with limited value for commercial wood production; the taller, open and closed forests with the greatest commercial wood value occur only close to the east, south-eastern and south-western coasts of the mainland, and across the island of Tasmania. There are c. 2 M ha of plantation forests (Table 1), also located mostly in the same, higher-rainfall, geographic regions as the tall forests. The current extent of native forests represents about 60% of that which existed prior to European colonization, with disproportionately-high forest loss and fragmentation in the major agricultural zones of eastern and southern Australia (Bradshaw, 2012; State of Environment Committee, 2011 Ch 5).

Some 40% of Australia's native forests – mostly woodlands – are managed privately under long term leases from state governments, and mostly collaterally as part of pastoral enterprises; c. 35% are publicly-owned and managed, half as formal conservation reserves (IUCN Categories I–IV); c. 15% are privately owned and managed; and c. 10% are formally owned and managed by Aboriginal Australians (Table 1, adapted from Montreal Process implementation Group, 2013 Table 1.7). Plantation forests are now largely under corporate ownership or management, as state governments divest themselves of hither-to public assets (Ferguson, 2014a, 2014b).

Natural ecological processes in some 90% of Australia's forests are dominated by wildfire (in the Australian vernacular, "bushfire"). Natural fire regimes were modified to varying degrees by Aboriginal peoples' extensive use of managed fire, which altered Australian landscapes as a result (Cary et al., 2003; Ellis et al., 2004; Gammage, 2011). The subsequent fire regimes and their consequences for landscapes were further and dramatically modified by British colonization, with the associated cessation of traditional management over much of the continent, and the imposition of new land and fire management regimes (see Cary et al., 2003; Bradstock et al., 2012). Managing fire and mitigating fire risk for people, primary production systems, and built and

environmental assets, remain dominant issues for Australian forest-related policy and management (see Ellis et al., 2004; Forest Fire Managers Group, 2014).

3. The evolution of Australian forest governance models: key actors, major conflicts, and policy phases

The general historical pattern of the evolution of forest governance in Australia echoes those in countries with which Australia shares historical and political commonalities, notably Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and USA (see Mather, 1991; Robins, 2007; Roche, in this issue; Williams, 1989). Constitutionally, Australia was established in 1901 as a federation of 8 states and territories, under the British Westminster system of government. In terms of forests, the Australian situation is most analogous to that of Canada, with the states (syn. provinces) retaining authority over and responsibility for natural resources, and national government powers being limited originally to external affairs, trade and taxation (Carron, 1985). These constitutional arrangements are of major consequence for forest and forest-related policy, defining the ways in which the national and state governments have interacted over forests and developed policies and policy instruments.

3.1. Key actors and their relative influence

A simplified list of the relative influence of key actor groups on Australian forest policy since 1788, the year of British colonization, is illustrated in Table 2. Such a characterization is obviously indicative and generalized, but consistent with the stakeholder groups recognized in major forest policy processes (e.g. Southern Regional Forest Forum, 2000; Montreal Process implementation Group, 2013) and similar characterizations for specific regions (e.g. Stork et al., 2014, Fig. 2). Dominant forest-related conflicts, and principal forest policy phases, discussed in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, are also identified in Table 2.

The majority of these actors feature prominently in Section 3.2. Those that do not are the mining sector, which has a profound but generally localized impact on forests, and the 'global public'. The most marked mining impacts historically were associated with the gold rushes of the 19th century (Dargavel, 1995); more recently, the mining industry has argued for and retained exploration and development rights over forests that would otherwise be conserved, for example in NSW's Brigalow forest region (Environmental Protection Authority, 2014) or Tasmania's Tarkine forests (Tarkine National Coalition, 2014).

International public interests began to be recognized in Australian policy development relevant to forests as a result of, amongst others, Australia's 1974 accession to the World Heritage Convention and the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Dargavel, 1995). Australia's accession to other international agreements, notably the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kyoto Protocol of the Convention on Climate Change, have also been significant for forest policy.

3.2. Conflicts over forests

Contestation amongst various of these actor groups over forests has been manifested in a series of conflicts since British colonization of Australia in 1788. The first series of conflicts, a "Forgotten War" (Reynolds, 2013) between Indigenous peoples and colonists, began with the latter's arrival in 1788 and continued more or less continually until the 1880s, and episodically until 1928. British colonization resulted in the decimation and dispossession of Australian Aboriginal people through much of the continent, with the loss of both lives and a way of life. The occupying power declared Australia *terra nullius*, "empty land", an assertion that was not redressed in law until 1992. Although Aboriginal Australians now formally own or manage 23% of Australia's land area, and 11% of its forests, almost all of these are confined to remote parts of northern Australia, and – with some notable exceptions

Table 1
Australian forest types & tenure (M ha).

Type tenure	Native woodland	Native open forest	Native closed forest	Plantation forest	Total M ha (%)
Leasehold	40	7			47 (38)
Public conservation	12	8	2		22 (18)
Private	9*	7*	1	1	18* (15)
Indigenous	9*	5*			14* (11)
Public production	4	6	1	1	12 (10)
Other/unknown/unresolved	8	1	1		10 (8)
Total M ha (%)	82 (66)	34 (27)	5 (4)	2 (2)	125 (100)

Source: Montreal Process Implementation Group (2013), Tables 1.7 & 6.4.

* Private & Indigenous ownership are not differentiated in Montreal Process Implementation Group (2013); the estimated split is based on author's interpretation of successive Australia's State of the Forests reports and Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (2005). The proportion of plantation in private ownership has increased since the Montreal Process Implementation Group (2013) report (Ferguson, 2014a, 2014b).

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