



Being good neighbours: Current practices, barriers, and opportunities for community engagement in Australian plantation forestry

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ABSTRACT

Although community engagement (CE) is widely recognised as an essential element of sustainable management, few studies have evaluated CE at an industry-wide scale, i.e. in terms of the specific CE needs and best practice methods needed when addressing engagement issues that apply across more than one business in an industry. We explored stakeholder views of the barriers to industry-wide CE within the Australian plantation forest industry. Interviews with key informants were conducted in 2010 throughout three major plantation regions in Australia: Tasmania, south west Western Australia, and the Green Triangle region (south west Victoria and south east of South Australia). We found that stakeholders often considered CE implemented by the forest plantation industry ineffective, due to: (a) lack of strong industry voice, (b) issues of trust, and (c) because technical experts in the forest industry lack skills in CE. Measures that are likely to promote more effective CE are discussed, including enhancement of relationships with external stakeholders, and enhancing CE skills of forestry professionals.

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Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is essential for any industry that has a responsibility to ensure management decisions take into account stakeholder concerns. This includes, amongst others, the forest plantation industry. Several of the common drivers for CE include political and lobbying pressures, legal requirements, and community perceptions that an industry is causing large-scale environmental harm (Whelan and Lyons, 2005), or is adversely affecting social values and norms of local communities (Barlow and Cocklin, 2003). Such issues require a response at an industry-wide scale (Acutt et al., 2004), rather than at the scale of individual businesses. CE is an essential component of a response strategy to these issues, but may not be effective in addressing the concerns raised if implemented by some businesses but not others.

In this paper we focus on the use of CE to address issues on behalf of a whole industry that is operating at national, state-wide or smaller geographical scales. Industry-wide CE can be differentiated from other types of CE, as it is conducted to address issues requiring collective industry commitment. Industries that

are reliant on natural resources such as fisheries, forestry, and mining need to be governed to the extent that each operator or resource user contributes to responsible management at an industry-wide scale (a 'common pool' responsibility). A single operator may consider themselves to be operating responsibly, but collectively the industry as a whole may be considered (by their stakeholders) to be operating irresponsibly. This can be due to, for example, a few larger organisations within an industry conducting business in an allegedly irresponsible manner. Legislation alone does not necessarily ensure that social and environmental industry responsibilities are fulfilled, in particular because ethical behaviour (and respecting societal moral norms) may involve operating beyond minimum compliance with regulations (Carroll, 1991). To ensure a sector manages natural resources responsibly, industry-wide CE is a tool to address stakeholder concerns over sectoral issues (Dare et al., 2011a). We focus on the Australian plantation forest industry in this study, as this sector provides a good case for exploring potential barriers to industry-wide CE.

CE or 'public participation is a process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making' (Creighton, 2005, p. 7). CE is an essential component of sustainable forest management (SFM), which includes balancing economic, social and environmental requirements for sustainability (McDonald and Lane, 2002; Wolfslehner and Vacik, 2008). SFM is a core component of Australia's *National*

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Forest Policy Statement (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995) and has been adopted as a guiding protocol for forest management in this country (Gee and Stratford, 2001). Engagement with stakeholders is an essential element of a responsible and sustainable management. Stakeholders include any group or individual who may have an interest or who are impacted by an issue (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009). To date the Australian forest plantation industry has been widely criticised by their stakeholders regarding forest management practices and the impact of plantations on rural communities (Dare et al., 2011b; Gritten and Mola-Yudego, 2010; Schirmer, 2007). Many of these issues are not just associated with the practices of one single forest company and require effective industry-wide CE, where responses to stakeholder concerns are addressed collectively by the industry through the use of CE. There is a need to improve CE by the forest plantation industry to achieve socially acceptable forest management, which is essential for SFM (Wang and Wilson, 2007).

A number of mechanisms currently promote effective industry-wide CE within the Australian forest plantation sector. These include forest certification, legislation, and initiatives such as good neighbour charters (GNCs), which are voluntary commitments to particular behaviours developed by the forest industry in collaboration with external stakeholders. Industry-wide CE performance is a culmination of the actions of individual forest companies and organisations, co-operative processes such as Regional Plantation Committees (RPCs) (Buchy and Race, 2001) and various initiatives such as GNCs. Further, CE within the forest sector has been influenced by legislation, market environments, and corporate cultures (Dare et al., 2011b). Dare et al. (2011c) identified the limitations to CE in Australian forest management including the lack of skills in CE by resource managers, corporate cultures that promote narrow CE benefits, and issues associated with a lack of trust in the forest industry. In this paper we will explore barriers to CE in more detail to develop strategies to improve industry-wide CE.

What constitutes effective CE is context dependent, being influenced by particular political, institutional and geographical situations (Head, 2007). CE by an industry sector contains a diversity of interests, a range of contexts and is hard to measure; for example, benefits are not tangible or may be long-term. However, one way to investigate how CE at an industry-wide scale can be improved is to gain an understanding of CE from the perspective of those involved in CE processes including: (a) those involved in industry collaborations, (b) those that are engaging external stakeholders on behalf of the industry, and (c) those stakeholders who are engaged by the industry. Such stakeholders play key roles in determining the effectiveness of industry-wide CE and thus their perspectives can provide insight into the barriers of effective industry-wide CE. Our research investigated a range of stakeholder views of CE from the perspective of those directly associated with CE – this included community members, various external stakeholders, industry associations, and other stakeholders who have been instigating and conducting CE on behalf of the forest industry.

Much of the CE literature that provides insights for improving future CE practice is based on processes undertaken by one organisation, a single case study, or an institution (examples are Johnston, 2010; Leys and Vanclay, 2011). However very little research focuses on understanding barriers to CE at an industry-wide scale (some limited discussion is included in Buchy and Race, 2001; Dare et al., 2011a; Race and Buchy, 1999; this principally identified the need for industry-wide CE but does not examine in detail the specific needs of industry-wide CE). We address this gap in the literature by identifying the barriers to industry-wide CE, and how they may be overcome. Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders – both internal and external to the forest plantation industry – who play key roles in determining the effectiveness of CE processes. In reflecting on these perceptions, we identify

ways to address barriers to industry-wide CE. The paper begins with an overview of the study context and conceptual basis for the research. Then we outline the methods used to gather and analyse stakeholder perceptions before presenting results. We discuss the implications of our results and outline barriers to industry-wide CE. The paper concludes with strategies to enhance the effectiveness of industry-wide CE by the Australian forest plantation industry.

Study context

Australia's plantation industry has undergone significant change over the past two decades. Recent rapid expansion of the plantation estate occurred under the influence of Australian government initiatives including '*Plantations for Australia: The 2020 Vision*', a document established in 1997 outlining a vision to have three million hectares of timber plantations by the year 2020 (Mercer and Underwood, 2002). The *2020 Vision* helped to ensure a supportive policy environment for plantation expansion (URS Forestry, 2007). Since the *2020 Vision*, most (over 86%) of the plantations established have been hardwood plantations, many of which were funded by MIS investors (URS Forestry, 2007), resulting in 65% of Australia's plantation area being privately owned in 2010 (ABARES, 2011). However, since 2007 the rate of establishment of new plantations has been decreasing, whereas in the 1990s there was a period of rapid plantation expansion due to private investment (ABARES, 2011). In 2010–2011 there was 9600 hectares of new plantations established within Australia, which has been the smallest expansion of new plantation area (established on land not previously used for forestry) since the early 1990s (Gavran, 2012). During 2009–2010 a number of MIS companies went into receivership which resulted in significant community concern. This poor outcome made it all the more challenging to gain acceptability from those investors who lost money, and other members of the public who were impacted by receiverships (Leys and Vanclay, 2011). For more information about the recent changes in Australian plantation forestry please refer a report which reviews policies and investment models to support continued plantation investment in Australia (de Fégely et al., 2011).

Historically, other community concerns have been related to issues such as chemical use, plantation impact on water quality, and the social and economic impacts of large scale plantation expansion on communities (Schirmer, 2007). CE is particularly important when there is any rapid or large scale development of new types of plantation forestry, as for example, community members may be concerned over the unknown potential impacts of large scale changes in the landscape. It is essential that the forest industry is committed to effective industry-wide CE, which can help alleviate such community concerns and support strategic industry responses to address legitimate complaints (Alexandra and Campbell, 2003). A recent inquiry into the future of the Australian forest industry conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry, states that 'the [plantation] industry should ensure that it engages flexibly and constructively with local communities to ensure that it adequately addresses community concerns and builds local support' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, Section 5.28).

Elements of effective industry-wide CE

We reviewed key literature on CE to develop a conceptual framework applicable to the needs of industry-wide CE. This literature is cited below. The elements essential for effective industry-wide CE are summarised in Fig. 1. These elements are interconnected as for example, CE skills need to be utilised to ensure CE processes

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