

Native Vegetation Regulation Review
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This submission is based on the personal experience of the writer from the age of 6 to 8 in the Dorrigo Plateau rain forests 1934 to 36, then from 1945 in the timber industry till 1979. The history of this farm goes back to 1921 and in 1984 became a demonstration sight for the NSW Government's Trees on Farm Project because age of some trees could be accurately identified back to 1949.

A course at Ultimo Tech in wood technology and a library that now includes "The biggest estate on earth" by Bill Gammage, has given valuable information on growing native species and also how and why the landscape was managed prior to 1780.

The necessity for an Act of Parliament to give guidance and authority to the management of Native Vegetation is not disputed. This is an opportunity to restore balance and take stock of the whole situation, but to be effective the Act needs to be wider in scope calling in assistance from Treasury and cooperation from other allied Departments. If it takes rewriting some drafts, so be it, but by hastening slowly, even waiting until the review of local government is complete, a number of issues affecting rural communities can be rectified.

Summary

The situation that has arisen out of the introduction of SEPP46 has had ramifications beyond just the perceived best way to protect native vegetation because of its impact on the social and financial structure of rural communities.

The circumstances leading up to the creation of this policy are reviewed under "History", while the section "Learning from Mistakes" shows that some of the heavy criticism and frustration displayed at public meetings has justification.

The negative results are exposed showing how those who wanted legislation to protect native vegetation acted in reality to destroy what they wanted to preserve.

The fact that those calling for this legislation, either were subsidised with taxpayer funds, or were seeking their satisfaction at no expense to themselves, while the minority paid in full with no compensation, were publicly vilified and discriminated against, does not seem to have registered in the public arena.

"Costs" financial and social are displayed, explained and alternatives proposed.

History

The existing Act's genesis should be examined because it was created from adverse circumstances. In the minds of the general public SEPP 46 was a necessary step, but the events leading up to it were not acts of vandalism, or great departures from past practices, rather necessary steps to overcome shortages and conditions arising out of WWII and its immediate aftermath.

The build up to the creation of State Environmental Planning Policy 46 goes back to WWII when the defence of the Realm Act dictated that the State Acts covering NSW forest activities cc 1905 and administrated by the NSW Forestry Commission were breached. The policy up until then was only mature trees to be harvested and the rate of harvest limited to a percentage of the forest's overall growth rate to allow for blow downs and other natural disturbance. The Crown forests were to be managed in perpetuity. Private forests were not protected.

Coachwood and Queensland maple were pre-eminently suitable for defence requirements, resulting in wholesale cherry picking of the most suitable trees for aircraft production and rifle furniture. After the war there was a grave shortage of cabinet timbers and veneer for plywood. The policy in relation to these rainforest areas was changed to "Cut out and get out" Not appreciated by many in that segment of the industry, but at that stage there was no going back.

In the 1960s Harris Dishawa at Eden started cutting the forests in coups for woodchips. The forests had been picked through for more than a century leaving trees with a spiral twist in the grain. It was the best forest policy for those particular forests to rehabilitate them, but in no way justified its extension into any other forest.

Aerial footage for TV gave the conservation movement real ammunition but to have no activity in native forests is equally foolish because Aboriginal practice tendered forests for millennium.

Sandmining was equally devastating footage, but the rehabilitation was quicker. Both combined was grist to the mass media's mill interested in creating headlines and created the bias in favour of the 'environment'. It was impossible to present the other side of the argument without taking out expensive advertising.

Following these events came the overblown issue of salting based on peculiarities in WA and SA; therefore any clearing of invasive species in Qld, NSW, or Vic was used as a further tool for the environment to dominate the political agenda.

The fact is that the salt problems in SA arise in SA itself. Only 25% of salt in the Murray R. at the mouth comes from Qld, NSW and Vic.

Throughout all this point scoring, who was looking at what the Aboriginals did? Brindabella Station owned by the Franklin family from the late 1880s did what the Aboriginals told them to do. The high country stock leases adjoining them did the same thing until they became Kosciusko National Park.

The Forestry Commission conducted controlled burning; so that cc 1973-4 when there were fires on the South Coast in adjoining Forestry and NPWS areas the survival rate for animals in Forestry care was much greater than in Parks. The media refused to publish the truth.

With all the restrictions on lighting fires invasive species could only be controlled mechanically. In the late 1950s early 60s the AMP Society as it was then, received many plaudits for mechanically removing huge areas of mallee and creating new farms by adding trace elements, but 30 years on, the media have a field day showing the same thing in Qld and Northern NSW. This time it is all bad and justifies SEPP46.

To invigorate SEPP46 now, in the minds of city populations, we have the distorted and politicised science of global warming, climate change/variability and a small voice for ocean acidification, but call it what you will, it is not the way our environment was created under Aboriginal Dreaming.

Learning from mistakes

Farmers, environmentalist, city populations and governments have all made their mistakes, as the following demonstrates.

The influence of the environment movement is world wide with the notion of "Lock it up and throw away the key" emanating from city populations and has influenced the thinking and practice here. The recent fires in Arizona are blamed on such interference over riding local knowledge and the trend is well established here. The Canberra fires 2003, the Victorian fires of 2009, the Ku-Ring-Gai fires 1994 to name a few. The Ku-Ring-Gai fires wiped out the koala population, the Canberra fires were preceded by an article in the Sydney Morning Herald condemning the clearing of vegetation under the powerlines, but

uncontrolled regrowth and forty odd years of accumulated litter provided the fuel. When the fires came three months later the animals that survived were in those cleared areas under the powerlines, but the SMH didn't tell anyone that.

The excessive quantity of fuel killed the mountain ash seed in the ground so that several hundred kilos of seed had to be brought in from Vic. The endangered rock wallaby breeding program seems to have been wiped out and there are miles of dead trees all of which are a future hazard to bush walkers for years to come. The devastation included lyre birds and severe soil erosion into the Cotter River, Canberra's water supply.

Large fires require large amounts of fuel regardless of hot dry conditions and it has been interference from city influence that has provided the fuel. All very well to have a lecturer from a tech college interviewed on ABC Radio making out there is a 40 year cycle of growth and burning with invasive species. All theory, but not backed up by Aboriginal practice of burning to preserve grass land and ease of hunting.

The much publicised incidence of Mr Peter Spencer on a hunger strike up a pole was about eucalypt regrowth.

There are similar small areas near Adelong alienating good grazing land for the last 30 years, but now in the mistaken belief that it will reduce salting and sequester carbon, the current Act has prevented any sensible silviculture.

Just how and why such areas succumbed to regrowth could be ill health, financial hardship due to drought, commodity downturn, or circumstances due to death duties, which were being phased out in the early 1980s.

The policy that prevents, with or without a PVP, a guide on silvicultural activity has achieved nothing for the environment, or the communities in those areas.

When regrowth of a species occurs the plants are so close together they inhibit their own growth. Depending on where and what species is involved, as at Adelong, after 30 years many trees are only 5 to 10 cm in diameter. Trees planted or thinned out to 5 or 6 metres apart are 30 plus cm in diameter after a known 27 years. As far as sequestration of carbon or soaking up water is concerned, diameter is the indicator of volume because twice the diameter is four times the area of a cylinder at that point.

A 4 inch diameter tree has 12 sq ins

A 12 inch diameter tree has 108 sq ins or 9 times the potential volume.

It is arguable that had there been thinning carried out on a couple of occasions the resulting trees would be bigger, better and more valuable within themselves, and also the land would have produced increasing income.

The Land has published photos of invasive species areas, the latest p3 of July 26 showing comparatively large areas of bare ground, other earlier photos show erosion due to the plants exuding inhibitors that limit grass growth. The long term benefit when loss of production, erosion, miniscule carbon sequestration and very doubtful salt reduction are taken into account, does not justify the sacrifice.

When vast areas of NSW Forestry were handed to NPWS with much fanfare to create a chain of parks to impress city electorates just before an election, the city electors were not told that the areas were full of weeds completely foreign to a national park and a further menace to adjoining landholders.

Costs

Farmers have not helped themselves when they clear an area by taking out all the big trees that are tolerated in other cropping areas such as Harden and Boorowa. Seeking to cut all costs as much as possible with bigger machinery is the motive and the notion that having big corporate farms is the way of the future validates such action in the minds of an economist, or accountant. The cost environmentally and socially, along with the necessity to keep rural

populations in place should more than balance out that cost saving.

However, where farmers have done themselves the most long term harm financially and environmentally, is in the fact that they have not told the public, the media, or their political representatives from all three parties, the truth about their business. They are not alone in this situation, strangely as it may seem, with local government, but it is farming that is the hardest hit, and both are incapable of being paid for the services they are forced to render to the general public.

The explanation is simple: farmers are forced to sell on fluctuating commodity markets and, or at auction, because they trade in highly perishable goods, either live or fresh food. There can be no control over the price received and therefore no control over recovering costs, especially new costs imposed.

The other big difference with farming and all other businesses is; that the working capital tied up in land is taxed yearly regardless of its ability to create income (due to low commodity prices or natural disasters) and the value is determined by the wealth of others who are not taxed in this manner and are purchasing for a changed land use.

This situation was recognised in the UK and EU and measures taken to ensure food security, give farmers and their rural support groups equal status in the whole community and have a workable partnership between tourism, industry, commerce and farming that shared the benefits. Rural land is for rural/forestry use and developers are restricted to existing urban areas. The result is smaller houses, more to an area with the town or city not requiring extended infrastructure. Koala populations are under threat while the present situation lasts.

Our farmers and their lobby groups have done nothing to inform government of their plight, because they have done no research and openly criticise, in their ignorance, the European model. There were troubles in establishing the present system in the EU with those wine lakes and butter mountains, but now with the recognition of the environmental benefits and importance of equality there is a clear advantage in adopting a similar system here in NSW.

Rabbits, cats, foxes, pigs all affect native vegetation as do various weeds and diseases, like myrtle rust. These pests invade farmland and the owner by law and act of self preservation suffers the cost of control. The nursery industry makes its money from imports, but is let off from contributing to any consequential damage. Crown land does not have the same restrictions on it to control pests and therefore acts to re-infect what the farmer has spent time and money trying to control.

The onus should be equal.

Importers of live or fresh cut plant material should be contributing to a levy to cope with consequential damage arising out of quarantine failure on the same lines as funds for fires.

Farmers have a legitimate right to ask for protection against such maladjustments and if there is any sincerity in the wellbeing of our environment, it is time for the various conservation groups to recognise that theory has to have practical outcomes, that costs are inevitable and be paid for equally by all. The Australian Conservation Foundation do advocate a stewardship payment to farmers for their conservation work.

It should be noted that the various conservation groups have had taxpayer funding since cc 1973/4 for office administration on the basis that they did not have the financial resources to match those supposedly available to industry and that it was necessary for balanced commentary.

The media decided that they would support conservation by publishing anything the conservationists wanted, but industry would have to pay for advertising. The timber industry

was never wealthy and farmers a hopeless case, no match for the vilification handed out by prominent members of the media and the more radical, mendacious conservation spokespersons. The Forestry Commission was denigrated while NPWS could do no wrong.

The timber industry who had initially welcomed the conservation movement and hoped to make some improvements soon found that they were dealing with radical idealists who did not stop at using misinformation, intimidation and violence.

It must also be noted that before and after SEPP46 there were some positive actions, such as the Trees on Farm Project combined with the Potter Foundation that laid the groundwork for Landcare. Landcare has been a great success due in no small part in that it provided hard cash while landholders matched that with labour. Greening Australia also has played a positive supporting role in Landcare, but now need to see that the emphasis needs to be on quality and suitability of trees, not just numbers.

A New Act

From the above, if anything is to be learned from the past and improved on for the future, there should be cooperation with resolution to find the best solution for a sustainable future. That includes applying what the Aboriginals did so successfully for millennia, not necessarily using fire, rather by finding ways of harvesting waste from silviculture and value adding.

They used their animals like wallaroos to control eucalypt regrowth, we must use goats and domestic animals to control certain weeds and to provide some cash flow.

Such methods maybe aesthetically unacceptable to some, but necessary in the short term to achieve the long term goal.

While the essence of these submissions is Native Vegetation, the practical reality is that funds are essential and that the health of native vegetation is not confined to a set of rules for the private landholder only.

The present laws governing all aspects of our environment are supposedly a reflection of the desire of the public and the public believe that they are beneficiaries of those laws, ipso facto the public should pay their fair share.

Obviously the changes necessary do need legislation, not only in the way of protecting native species, but also in the ways of financing etc.

Recent editions of The Land show that city individuals had more than their fair share of input into the present regulations, but forgot that the Aboriginals used the dead and fallen trees to cook with on a daily basis.

As far as farmers are concerned in NSW they need to be paid for the environmental work they do. It is not their fault that weeds; invasive species, native or exotic, are on their property and the same applies to feral animals. The financial purist says the farmer is the beneficiary so should pay, but forgets that those extra costs cannot be recovered from an auction system. By the same token farmer's capital should not be taxed, which includes local government rates, LHPA rates, water infrastructure maintenance charges and CMA because to do so breaks the rule: "Do not tax inputs only tax profits made from those inputs". This is the basis of the UK and EU model.

Local government needs more money to control weeds and feral animals on their roads for the same reason as farmers. Keeping weeds under control and in some cases, eventually eliminated, has benefits for all residents of the State.

Because of the enormity of the task ahead the effort to protect and in some areas of public land, restore species, priorities would have to be made in accordance with a long term plan of action.

Recommendations

Replicate as far as possible the practical Aboriginal practices under their Dreaming to protect and enhance native vegetation in NSW.

Fuel reduction, control of weeds and feral animals to be a priority:

By making control measures equal for public and private land

By facilitating new industries contracted to local government and/or LHPA

Research and implementation into value adding the waste from silviculture

Make compatible industry available in national parks

Seek Federal Government assistance regarding tax for having PPPs to reclaim and restore derelict Crown forests on a very long term basis.

No discrimination in sharing costs

National Parks are not holy places and should be administered free of political intrigue to give the best reflection of the environment of that particular area.

The Murray River red gum forests to be under Forests NSW management for the very long term protection of selected trees while creating income from sustainable forest practise.¹

Local populations represented by the area's local shire council and/or Region of Councils to determine their own strategy to preserve native vegetation.

Work with the Federal Government to establish a levy on all fresh or live plant or animal product to cover the cost of any breakdown in quarantine.

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Notes

¹ The early settlers felled trees of three metre diameter, possibly 2000 years old. Red gums have the capacity to coppice so that a single tree harvested can give rise to two trees from the same stump and produce a couple of railway sleepers in about 60 years . The working forest and timber industry can provide the skills, protection and the finance to preserve these forests in perpetuity. A national park cannot.