MANAGING AMIDST CONFLICT: THE HUON DISTRICT FORESTS OF TASMANIA

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| Name of forest: | Southern Forests of Tasmania |
| Location: | Huon District, Tasmania |
| Area (hectares): | 123 000 |
| Managing entity: | Forestry Tasmania |
| Mgt. objectives: | Sustainable timber production |
| Country: | Australia |

“A continual balancing act,” is how Steve Davis describes his job of managing Huon District’s state forests. Davis is an experienced forestry professional who works as Huon District Forester for Forestry Tasmania, the state government’s forestry agency.

“I have to balance expectations for timber production against expectations for conservation,” he says. “Everyone expects that I will do the best that can be done for each, and that somehow everything is going to be rosy — to turn out well. At the same time, I have to think about the local community and the people who work in the forests.”

Steve Davis considers his job to be one of the most difficult in all of Tasmania.

“Although I try to please everyone, no one ever seems to be satisfied,” says this exemplary manager, whose job description entails gathering detailed information about the forests, developing comprehensive forest management plans within a well-defined legislative and policy framework — and spending a lot of time explaining all this to community and stakeholder groups. His path to effective management is based on the establishment of clear and transparent processes to help him deal with the pressures of conflicting expectations and multiple objectives.
“Forestry in Tasmania is a controversial and often heated topic,” he observed. “We have to have robust systems that can stand up to intense scrutiny.”

**Tasmania**

People have lived in Tasmania and used the forests for at least 30,000 years. The isolation of the indigenous Aboriginal people ended in 1803, when British colonists arrived on the island. Disease and frontier conflicts decimated the indigenous population. Most of those who survived were displaced and much of the traditional knowledge of forest management was lost, although recently, attempts to reconstruct it have been initiated. Colonial society developed slowly during the nineteenth century, with the principal forestry developments centred on establishing a number of small sawmills that provided timber for building and for export to the mainland. In 1901, Tasmania joined other Australian colonies in forming the federal nation of Australia.

Tasmania is Australia’s smallest state with a population of 478,000 people. Since the 1930s, much of Tasmania’s industrial development has been based on abundant, cheap hydro-electricity and plentiful wood allocated by licences or in forest-harvesting concessions. In the 1990s, the concessions were replaced by a system of long-term sales accompanied by a legislated commitment to make a minimum quantity of sawlogs available to industry each year. The majority of wood produced in Tasmanian forests is pulped for use in paper mills, including a substantial volume exported as woodchips to overseas markets, primarily to Japan. Tourism is also an important industry for Tasmania, with the beauty of the natural forests constituting an integral part of Tasmanian landscapes.

**Forest management under scrutiny**

In March 2004, 10,000 people marched through the streets of the state capital, Hobart, protesting against the continued clear-felling of old-growth forests. They were particularly incensed about felling giant trees, some over 80 metres tall, in the Styx Valley. Their protest was the latest in 30 years of public and political controversies about how the forests should be used. A week later, a similar number of people marched through Launceston, Tasmania’s second city, in support of the forest industries and the employment they provide.

Tasmania has the most vehement environmental controversies in Australia. These have deeply divided the community and in spite of many attempts to resolve the controversies politically, the situation was still potent enough to influence the major political parties in the 2004 federal election. Forestry issues are so controversial in Tasmania for the following reasons:
Forests cover over 50 percent of the island, the largest proportion of any Australian state. Forests are highly valued for wilderness, conservation and timber.

Tasmanian forests contain *Eucalyptus regnans*, the world’s tallest hardwood tree, as well as endemic conifers.

The forest industry is the largest employer in Tasmania, a state with a higher rate of unemployment than Australia generally.

The industry is highly concentrated with one company, Gunns Ltd, processing over 70 percent of all the wood felled in the state. The industry is politically powerful.

The environmental movement, spearheaded by the Wilderness Society, is very active and is linked to national and international environmental organizations. It enjoys considerable public support and is adept at gaining media attention.

The Tasmanian Parliament has four Green Party members that keep forest issues before its 25-member House of Assembly.

Australia’s voting systems enable minor parties, such as the Green Party, to exert political influence.

The Tasmanian State Government has jurisdiction over its land and forests, but the Australian Federal Government controls foreign affairs and trade, and most of the budget. Spurred by the environmental vote in the big mainland cities of Sydney and Melbourne, the federal government blocked the Tasmanian Government from building dams in wilderness areas. The federal government successfully nominated a large area in the southwest of Tasmania to be declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Area — in recognition of outstanding natural, scientific and Aboriginal heritage values. Logging and mining are not allowed in the World Heritage area.

To try and resolve the environmental controversies across the country, the federal and state governments agreed on a National Policy Statement that aimed at:

- having a system of “Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative” conservation reserves;
- sustainably managing forests outside the conservation reserves — such as the Huon state forests; and
- developing an internationally competitive timber industry.

The policy was followed by a Regional Forest Agreement process that identified the conservation reserves and the areas to be used for commercial purposes. It defined the tasks of forest management, established guidelines and assigned responsibilities.
The federal and Tasmanian governments entered into a 20-year Regional Forest Agreement in 1997. It divided Tasmania’s 3.2 million hectares of native forests into roughly equal areas of conservation reserves, state forests managed for multiple uses including wood production, and private land. This was not completely accepted by the environmental movement which continues to argue that many state forest areas — especially those with old growth — should be transferred to conservation reserves. However, the state forests still have to be managed by foresters, such as Steve Davis in the Huon District, for the uses that the state and federal governments have authorized.

**Huon District**

Steve Davis and his staff manage 123,000 hectares of forests on a beautiful upland landscape that extends to a coastal area of small farms and orchards. The state forests of Huon District lie just outside the World Heritage Area and comprise mainly tall eucalyptus rain forests, with dense temperate understoreys. The magnificent *Eucalyptus regnans* dominates the best sites with some trees being more than 80 metres tall and 450 years old. A significant proportion of the forests, including some areas scheduled for harvesting, has not previously been logged.

In 2001, the roundwood harvest from natural forests in Huon District totalled 415,000 cubic metres of timber, of which 75 percent comprised pulpwood, with the majority of the remainder being sawlogs or peeler logs. Among the timber

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**Regeneration in Compartment Picton 39A in Southern Tasmania (courtesy Forestry Tasmania).**

a) 1989: The compartment was logged for pulpwood, sawlogs and veneer logs in 1988, followed by aerial sowing with eucalypt seeds collected locally in 1989.

b) 1994: Eucalypt re-growth at five years of age.

c) 2003: Eucalypt re-growth at 14 years of age. At 8-years of age, the trees had reached a height of 15 metres, by which time shrub undergrowth had also regenerated naturally.
species, *Eucalyptus obliqua* and *Eucalyptus globulus*, are highly valued for veneer, furniture making, construction timber and paper pulp — with large volumes also exported as woodchips. Myrtle (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), which grows in the rain forest understorey, provides a fine furniture timber. The endemic conifer, celery top pine (*Phyllocladus aspleniifolius*) is valued particularly as a timber for boat building. Two other endemic conifers, Huon pine (*Dacrydium franklinii*) and King Billy pine (*Athrotaxis selaginoides*), grow locally but are not harvested in Huon District. Leatherwood (*Eucryphia lucida*) is prized by apiarists for the distinctive honey produced from its flowers.

### Silvicultural systems

Coupe felling is the principal silvicultural system. It is used because the Eucalypts are strongly light-demanding species that cannot be regenerated under an overstorey or in the presence of the remaining understorey. In natural systems, *Eucalyptus regnans* and *E. obliqua* forests on wet sites regenerate only after occasional severe wildfires have killed the old trees and left bare, scorched ground on which the prolific seed can generate new trees. A site for collaborative long-term ecological and silvicultural research has been set up at Warra to monitor change and see if alternative silvicultural systems can be devised.

Logging contractors clear-cut the forest in coupes of 50–100 hectares and transport the best logs to sawmills and veneer plants. Some rare conifers and other specialty species are sold for boat building or local woodcrafts. The remainder which accounts for three-quarters of the wood cut in the district is despatched to woodchip export mills.

Once logging is finished in each coupe, foresters burn the slash and remaining understorey to create a bare “ash bed” onto which seeds are dropped from aircraft to regenerate the forest. Steve Davis reports that this process is generally successful, although at times some wet south-facing slopes are difficult to burn and have to be planted with nursery-grown seedlings.

To prevent wallabies and other native animals from eating the growing seedlings, some areas are treated with “10-80” poison. Native animals can be killed only if the Department in charge of the environment issues a permit. If used properly, the poison can be specific only to the target species and its use has to be supervised by the water authorities to prevent contamination. Although it is an effective means of raising a new crop of trees and probably has negligible residual environmental effects, poisoning is highly unpopular. Although its use against native animals is still legal in Tasmania, Steve Davis and his team will stop using it in 2005.

The new crops of trees are to be grown on rotations of 80 to 100 years. On about seven percent of the area, where slopes are gentle, thinning operations are carried out at mid-rotation.
Community views

Harvesting operations are a point of major controversy in Tasmania. Protests against logging in the forests have been held throughout Tasmania for more than 25 years. The protests have led to considerable antagonism between the environmental movement and forest product companies, their logging contractors and workers.

“There are still large tracts of old-growth forest that are directly threatened by logging. These adjoin the World Heritage Area and we believe they should be included within it,” said Mike Noble, of the Wildness Society, an active environmental advocacy group. Adam Burling, from the local Huon Valley Environment Centre, agreed. He organizes regular public protests against logging of the forests to ensure the issue remains at the forefront of public awareness.

Tony Ferrier, Manager of Environment and Development Services for the Huon Valley Council, reported that there was also significant local concern about the effect on long-term biodiversity in the forests:

“Many people believe that the relatively short harvesting regimes result in inadequate time for non-eucalyptus species to regenerate, and monocultures are being actively encouraged,” he said.

Apiarists, craft workers and other groups have joined the environmental advocacy groups, in more recent times. One group of small businesses, furniture makers and craft workers, the Timber Workers for Forests, argues that clear-felling the forests depletes the supply of myrtle and the rare conifers needed by artisans producing high-value wood manufactures. But another group of woodworkers — the Woodcraft Guild Tasmania — sees the situation quite differently. Their President, George Harris, feels that the forestry managers give a lot of attention in their planning to supplying the speciality timbers that his members need. This is done by providing salvage areas that people can apply for, and by arranging for a storage yard, Island Speciality Timbers, to keep parcels of rare timbers until needed. His experience is that, “the foresters are fair and decent people, easy to talk to and straight-dealing.”

The controversies pervade society and even divide families sometimes. Scott McLean, Secretary of the Forestry Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union has gone so far as to introduce a special programme to help forest workers deal with the continual criticism. He provides them with basic facts about forest management on a foldout card they can keep in their pockets. He also trains them to deal with conflict in a non-violent way.

“Don’t get into fights with environmentalists; take a deep breath, think for a moment or two, and then just tell them the facts from your point of view,” he often tells his workers.
Today, the workers are looking forward to a national training package that will cover quality assurance and product care in the forest industries. Workers hope that — when this becomes a reality — they will finally be given proper recognition for their skills in balancing production and conservation.

Planning system
The challenging situation in Tasmania requires that Steve Davis and his forestry team have a well-developed, clear and transparent planning system for managing the Huon state forests. It incorporates:

1. a legal and policy framework;
2. assessment and mapping;
3. Forest Management Plans; and
4. operational plans.

1. Framework
The legal framework is based on the Forestry Act, first passed by the Tasmanian Parliament in 1920 and updated several times since. It makes Forestry Tasmania the government agency responsible for managing state forests, but not for managing national parks. The Regional Forest Agreement, mentioned earlier, also sets out management responsibilities.

Forestry Tasmania has policies aiming to make it an “internationally competitive” and “sustainable multiple-use” forest manager. Its processes in environmental management have been certified as meeting the ISO 14001 Standard.

2. Assessment and mapping
Tasmania has a long history of assessing and mapping the timber values of its forests and, since the late 1980s, their heritage values. The Regional Forest Agreement process provided funds for comprehensive assessments of the environmental, economic, social and heritage values. A substantial database of these values provides the basis for planning how the Huon and other forests are managed.

A Management Decision Classification system uses the data to map the state forests into zones. Separate zones delineate areas for wood production, and those that require special care — such as those next to the World Heritage Area, those that have indigenous or cultural heritage values and those containing rare or endangered plants and animals. Much of the Huon area is on limestone, or karst country, and ancient glacial moraines are present in several areas. Tasmania is
among the world-leaders in recognizing the “geodiversity” as well as the “biodiversity” values in forests. However, it is difficult and expensive to find many of the heritage and geological features hidden by the dense understorey in these forests.

3. **Forest Management Plan for the Huon Forest District**

The *Forestry Act* requires a comprehensive Forest Management Plan for every state forest and specifies that the responsible Minister must approve them. The 10-year Forest Management Plan for the Huon Forest District is a concise, readable document that describes forest management objectives and activities. The current plan was approved in 2000, after its predecessor was amended to bring it into line with the Regional Forest Agreement. The plan provides the forest manager, Steve Davis, with clear guidelines and a mandate for implementing forest management activities. A key ingredient in the process of formulating the plan is provision of extensive opportunities for public participation in the planning process.

The current plan identifies 21 production, conservation and process objectives. For example, it delineates the various management zones and allocates forest for production purposes (52 percent), for production with additional special management (22 percent), for tree plantations (3 percent) and for forest protection (23 percent). The plan describes the silvicultural prescriptions that are to be applied for general wood production, special timbers and plantations. Prescriptions for management of biodiversity, old-growth forests, wilderness, flora, fauna, geo-conservation, soils, landscape and heritage values are also covered. The plan also has sections devoted to management for recreation, education, access, fire, mining, honey production and other activities.

In addition to the comprehensive Forest Management Plan, there are several subordinate operational plans. A three-year Wood Production Plan has been developed in consultation with the major wood-processing companies and local municipal councils. It sets out where new forest roads are to be built, which coupes are to be logged, and which municipal roads will be used to haul the wood to market.

4. **Operational plans**

A Forest Practices Plan is written for every coupe before it is logged. An experienced forester, trained in the provisions of the Forest Practices Code, prepares each plan. Manuals covering heritage values, biodiversity, geomorphology and other considerations guide the foresters in writing the plans. Each plan consists of a detailed topographical map showing the area to be felled, the boundaries of any patches to be given special care or not to be felled, designs for roads, tracks and log landings, and the general direction in which logs are to be hauled to landings.
The plan guides practices at the landings including de-limbing, and sorting. Any special prescriptions are noted on the plans, such as the care to be taken if any sinkholes to underground limestone caves are discovered during the course of operations.

The Forest Practices Plan is signed by the logging contractor and the company buying the wood. Once logging is completed, a forester inspects the coupe to assess whether the plan has been complied with, or whether the contractor needs to complete remedial work.

The Forest Practices Code is based on a principle of co-regulation by the forest manager, the company and its contractors. However each year, a separate government agency, the Forest Practices Board audits 15 percent of the coupes against 124 criteria. This monitors performance and has improved the standard of logging. In the Huon Forest District, the audits have found a compliance rate of more than 90 percent in the last three years. The Forest Practices Code and plans are subject to extensive debate. For example, some people believe that current pre-harvesting assessments are not adequate, and that high costs are used as an excuse for failing to implement satisfactory systems.

“Tasmania should follow the practice in the State of Victoria where detailed flora and fauna surveys are done before any coupe plan is prepared,” advised Adam Burling. “We need these types of surveys in order to give greater protection to rare birds, such as eagles and owls.” He also fears that the use of poison to kill browsing animals might have serious negative effects higher up the food chain.

However, Gary King, Environmental Planning Manager for Forestry Tasmania rebutted such criticism: “Every coupe is surveyed for flora communities and fauna habitat including nesting sites for eagles and goshawks, and the impact of “10-80” is monitored,” he pointed out.

**Monitoring and reporting**

The planning system has procedures for monitoring and reporting progress against its components at each of its four levels. For example, at the legal and policy level, the first five-yearly review of the Regional Forest Agreement has recently been completed. It found that most forest management issues are being satisfactorily addressed, and made only a few recommendations for issues where “further progress needs to be made.” However, the political sensitivity of forest issues in an election year was such that the federal government stalled on responding to it, even months after it was completed.

“We are structured on a corporate model — as a government business enterprise, rather than as a traditional forestry department or a commission,” explains Gary King in Forestry Tasmania’s Head Office. “This has encouraged
us to set clear objectives and to implement proactive measures achieve these aims. Our performance is required to be measured and reported to Parliament and the public every year.” Huon District has its own business plan with detailed performance measures — mostly established in quantifiable terms — such as the amount of wood produced, compliance rates with the Forest Practices Code, or minimizing the area burned in wildfires. Each year, Steve Davis is required to report on progress made against the plan’s targets.

The municipal government, the Huon Valley Council, sponsors a “Healthy Rivers Program” and has a similar attitude to measuring performance. The Council collates water quality measurements taken by government agencies as well as those taken by local schools and community groups. One of its initial findings is that the quality of water coming from the forest is virtually unaffected by the forest operations. Steve Davis and his team also monitor water quality in all streams immediately below sites where chemicals are applied, and the results are published annually. However, Adam Burling from the Huon Environment Centre remains worried about pollution and thinks that the water should be more rigorously tested for residues of the herbicides and fertilizers used in the plantations.

Long-term visions

Although the current Huon Forest District Management Plan will expire in 2010, the forest managers have much longer-term visions for the future. Six hundred hectares of new plantations are established each year, approximately half with the local blue gum, *Eucalyptus globulus* and most of the remainder with the fast-growing *Eucalyptus nitens* from Victoria and a small area of *Pinus radiata*. The wood from these plantations — and from regenerating trees in the coupes previously cut over — is expected to generate a fourfold increase in wood production in the future. Development of industrial capacity to utilize the additional wood is being pursued vigorously, with a bold plan to build an integrated forest products’ processing centre. The planned centre will comprise a log sorting yard, a sawmill, a factory to make laminated timber and an electricity co-generation plant fuelled by waste wood.

Tourism and the economy

Forestry Tasmania seeks to capitalize on opportunities to develop tourism. Deep in the forest, at the confluence of the Huon and Picton rivers, it has built the “Tahune Air Walk” — a forest canopy walkway suspended 45 metres above the river bank. The facility includes a stylish visitors’ centre, forest walking tracks and interpretive signs that explain how the forest is managed to balance production and conservation pressures. The walkway has proven very popular and presently attracts more than 150 000 visitors each year. A Forest and Heritage Centre in
the nearby township of Geeveston complements the Air Walk, with displays depicting the history of the timber industry and a woodcrafts’ gallery.

The economy of the Huon Valley, in particular Geeveston, has been revitalized and business confidence turned around by the boom in tourism and by plans for the establishment of an integrated processing centre, which will be built nearby. New cafes, craft shops and accommodation facilities have been established to supply the tourist market.

Public consultation and participation

Public consultation is an established part of Australian planning practice, but may not affect the outcomes of the political process. For example, Tasmania undertook the extensive, multi-sector, “Tasmania Together” public consultation
from 2000 to 2003, that proposed to “end clear felling in areas of high conservation value old-growth forest by January 1, 2003, and cease all clear felling in old-growth forests by 2010”. However, the government had to balance this with economic and employment pressures, and it continued as it had agreed to under its Regional Forest Agreement with the federal government.

Facilitating involvement in forest management by the Aboriginal community requires that the various groups be consulted and that sufficient time be allowed for consensus views to be developed. Steve Davis is actively working with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council to plan the protection of Aboriginal heritage values of the Riveaux Cave area in Huon District. While progress is being made in this direction, Aboriginal cultural historian, Kaye McPherson of the Manuta Tunapee Puggaluggia within the Lia Pootah community, believes that the government fails to acknowledge the diversity of indigenous Australians and their remaining traditional knowledge.

Nevertheless, consultation is an essential part of good forest management and can be successful at the local scale. Steve Davis spends a lot of his time explaining forest management to community groups. A recent example of re-routing a historic walking track to the Hartz Mountains showed that face-to-face discussions could be helpful in finding acceptable compromises between production and conservation on a small local scale. More importantly, he demonstrates to community groups that forest management in Huon District is conducted in an honest and open manner, even if some people disagree with the forest policies that he implements.

Conclusion
Forest management in Southern Tasmania has developed a detailed planning, monitoring, auditing and reporting system in response to international and national agreements and policies. It operates in a climate of widespread community debate and general dissatisfaction over the felling of old-growth forests. It is under intense scrutiny from environmental and other groups with very high expectations of what should — and can — be achieved. Although the context is often contentious, forest management generally proceeds in a clear, orderly and professional way.

About the author
Dr John Dargavel has worked as a forester in government, industry and universities for more than 40 years. He has authored numerous scientific papers and is the author or editor of 10 books on forest management, policy and history. He is a Visiting Fellow in the Australian National University and is a former President of the Australian Forest History Society.