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Contents

FOREWORD IV

WELCOME V

CONFERENCE PROGRAM VI

THANKS TO SPONSORS VIII

SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES IX

PANELLIST'S BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES XII

KEYNOTE PAPERS XV

DETERMINING OUR PROSPECTS: PARAMETERS AND PURPOSES 1
John Dargavel *1*
PROSPECTS FOR AUSTRALIAN PLANTATIONS – BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES 7
Nick Roberts *7*
PROSPECTS FOR AUSTRALIAN PLANTATIONS – ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVES 15
Don Henry *15*
BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING THROUGH PLANTATION FORESTRY 17
Stewart Lockie *17*

INVITED PAPERS 28

AUSTRALIAN SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR PLANTATION PRODUCTS 29
Ian S. Ferguson[1], Ray D. Spencer[2], Mellissa Wood[2] and Adam Gerrand[2]* *29*
INTERNATIONAL MARKET PROSPECTS AND THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN PLANTATION INDUSTRY 41
Mark Kelly and Lyndall Bull* *41*
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT 55
E. K. Sadanandan Nambiar *55*
GLOBAL CHANGE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT 69
Chris Mitchell *69*
EMERGING MARKETS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES 71
Keith Lamb, Ian Sandeman, David Brand* *71*
CHANGES IN MARKETS, TECHNOLOGY AND RESOURCES PROSPECTS FOR WOOD BASED PRODUCTS 73
Peter Vinden *73*
INNOVATIVE PLANTATION PRODUCTS 81
Roslyn Tamara Prinsley *81*
PLANTATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY SCIENCE - THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND POLITICAL SETTINGS 83
*Jason Alexandra and Andrew Campbell** *83*
PLANTATIONS, RIVER FLOWS AND RIVER SALINITY 97
Rob Vertessy[*], Lu Zhang and Warrick Dawes *97*
PLANTATION FORESTS AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION 111
D.B. Lindenmayer[1], R.J. Hobbs[2] and D. Salt[1]* *111*
PLANTATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES 121
Jacki Schirmer and Matthew Tonts*** *121*
THE ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF PLANTATIONS: MAINTAINING INVESTMENT FOR REPLANTING AND EXPANDING AUSTRALIA'S PLANTATION RESOURCE 135
Paul Biggs *135*

APPENDIX 1 LIST OF SPEAKERS, TIMES AND PAPER TITLES 139

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING THROUGH PLANTATION FORESTRY

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Falling commodity prices, droughts, dying towns, bank foreclosures, escalating suicide rates, decreasing access to services and environmental degradation all form part of a well-known story of life in contemporary rural Australia. The litany of crises affecting the bush have become such mainstays of urban media as to appear commonplace. While politicians claim that they never forgot the bush, the rise of the populist right wing One Nation Party in the late 1990s certainly helped to ensure that political concern for the plight of rural Australians is now proclaimed at every opportunity. Rural people are looking for solutions and there are plenty of people with solutions to offer. From deregulation of labour and commodity markets to the redefinition of private property rights and investment in natural resource management, there are plenty of proffered strategies out there. Within this mix, plantation forestry appears, at face value, to have much to offer. But it is also apparent that many rural community's experiences of plantation forestry, to date, have not been promising. Complex problems demand complex answers which no single strategy can provide.

This paper is not so much concerned with an evaluation of successes and failures with plantation forestry so far but with an analysis of the conditions under which the potential contribution of plantation forestry to social vitality may be realised. As other papers in this volume address in detail the direct environmental, social and economic impacts of plantation forestry, this paper will deal instead with the wider social context for change in rural Australia—the 'big picture'. It is organised into four sections: 'the obvious', 'the easy answers' and 'the flies in the ointment' and 'the good news'.

The opening section summarises select elements of the crises facing rural Australia; the potential contribution of plantation forestry to reversing these crises; and a number of social issues associated with plantation forestry itself. In doing so it argues that only a shift from industrial style plantations to more diverse and integrated regional strategies incorporating farm forestry and other alternatives are likely to reverse the declining fortunes of rural communities. What makes this section obvious? While all the issues raised are complex and deserving of detailed and ongoing investigation, the analysis here is necessarily brief and little, if anything, will be discussed with which readers will not already be familiar.

The second section identifies some now well-recognised principles that necessarily underlie successful attempts at community revitalisation; that is, the enhancement of social capital, vertical and horizontal coordination of activity, and development of local leadership capacity. Are these necessarily all too easy answers to far more complex problems as the section heading implies? No. But it must be recognised that by themselves these are not sufficient to achieve rural sustainability (environmental,

economic or social). Too often they are repeated *ad nauseam* as mystical mantras with no obvious link to on-ground change (Cernea 1993).

The third section argues that it is only through a far more sophisticated understanding of the social context for the challenges facing rural Australia (in particular, the relationships between economic restructuring, community well-being and environmental sustainability) that opportunities may be identified to enhance the benefits of plantation forestry and mitigate against negative social outcomes including resource-use conflict.

The final section suggests that despite the substantial hurdles that appear to beset the implementation of integrated regional plantation forestry strategies, there are a number of well developed social research tools—including social impact assessment, stakeholder analysis and social mapping—that may provide a robust platform for participation and negotiation among all stakeholders. Plantation forestry proponents cannot be expected to solve all the problems of rural Australia, but up-front investment in strategies to understand target communities and improve negotiation have significant potential to reduce conflict and promote the realisation of benefits from forestry operations.

THE OBVIOUS

When it is considered that:

- the top 20 percent of broadacre agricultural enterprises in Australia produce over half the output and earn favourable returns on investment;
- while the rest struggle with declining terms of trade and often negative incomes; and,
- the numbers of very large and very small farms are increasing;
- while the numbers of medium sized farms is decreasing;

It comes as no shock that the policy of governments and farm lobby groups alike is to remove unviable small to medium sized enterprises from the industry and to sponsor research that promotes further intensification (Higgins and Lockie 2001). On the basis of the statistics alone, restructuring, or adjusting, the farm sector appears to be a highly rational course of action.

This is bad news, however, for agriculture-dependent rural communities. It is not the regular price and profitability slumps of farming that threaten the viability of rural communities but the long-term pressure to increase productivity generated by ever declining terms of trade (the cost-price squeeze). This is just as evident in years when farming is profitable as in those when it is not. The constant drive for increased productivity in agriculture inevitably promotes reduced farm labour requirements. This, in turn, fosters the depopulation of rural areas, reduced demand for goods and services in rural towns, reduced viability of other rural businesses and services, and so on, in a self-reinforcing downward spiral dubbed the 'dynamics of decline' (Lawrence and Williams 1990). To ensure long-term viability, rural communities, in general, need to reduce their overwhelming reliance on agriculture. Economic diversification is also important to the growing numbers of small farmers who rely on off-farm income for their own viability.

The environmental news is grim as well. The widely quoted estimate that environmental degradation costs Australian agriculture $2 billion annually (Madden *et*

al. 2000) says nothing of the costs incurred by other sectors of the economy or impacts on the amenity and health of the wider community.

Plantation and farm forestry has been promoted in this environment as a national strategy to facilitate more sustainable agriculture by reducing land degradation and diversifying farm incomes, and to enhance regional development by contributing to industrial diversification and employment growth (Race and Curtis 1996). I have no doubt that these proffered benefits are genuine and will not discuss them in any more depth.

But as participants in this conference will be aware, plantation forestry is not without its critics. Jacki Schirmer and Peter Kanowski (2001) summarise the main concerns regarding plantation forestry at a number of levels: the farm, the community and the region (see also Wilkinson *et al.* 2001).

At the farm level, concerns are expressed about:

- shading of crops, pasture and houses on neighbouring properties and altering of views;
- increased feelings of isolation through the fragmentation of previously more open agricultural landscapes;
- the willingness of plantation companies to contribute to boundary fence establishment and maintenance costs;
- harbouring of feral and pest animals;
- land value rises or declines;
- off-site impacts of chemicals used to establish and manage plantations; and,
- loss of productive agricultural land.

At the community level, concerns are expressed about the potential of plantation forestry to accelerate the 'dynamics of decline' through:

- loss of community members as plantation companies purchase land and resident landowners leave;
- loss of services following depopulation; and,
- changes in the type, location and availability of employment towards regionally based, tenuous jobs.

And at the regional level, concerns are expressed about:

- loss of amenity and tourism through landscape change;
- environmental impacts such as declining biodiversity and water quality;
- logging traffic and its potential impact on road safety and condition; and,
- long-term economic viability should future markets for plantation timber fail to materialise.

Again, it is not my intention to comment in depth on these concerns other than to note two other points made by Schirmer and Kanowski (2001). First, little data is available on how widely concerns are shared among impacted communities. Second, irrespective of the empirical validity of each and every concern, or how widely they are shared, they demand positive responses from the plantation forestry industry.

In shaping a positive response, Schirmer and Kanowski (2001) raise a further two points that I will reiterate here. First, increasing levels of consultation and participation in decision-making have potential to reduce conflict, particularly in relation to subjective impacts such as change in landscape amenity or beauty. Second, the replacement of industrial style plantations with farm forestry and other approaches more integrated with other land uses may be better placed to realise the potential benefits of plantation forestry and to address community concerns.

Implementation of strategies such as integrated farm forestry are, however, clearly much more complex than industrial plantation forestry. This is reflected in Race and Curtis's (1996; see also Race 1999) review of the Australian government's National Farm Forestry Program (FFP), which found that while the Program had been successful in raising the profile of farm forestry as a legitimate farm enterprise in many regions it had failed to establish a single viable farm forestry industry in any region. The FFP had focussed much of its efforts on research and awareness raising, but had not tackled effectively the questions of skills development, labour requirements, property rights, farm succession planning, market access and flexibility, and so on.

THE EASY ANSWERS

If diverse, but integrated, approaches to the management of plantation forestry and other land uses are necessary for the realisation of plantation forestry's potential contribution to community well-being, then clearly some strategies are necessary to mobilise and coordinate a large and diverse range of actors.

One of the oldest research traditions in rural sociology—and one that could easily be applied to the question of why more farmers don't participate in farm forestry—is known as 'barriers to adoption' or 'technology transfer' research. Research within this tradition concentrates on identifying the social-psychological and socio-economic attributes of individuals that are associated with adoption behaviour. It is then believed possible to accelerate technology transfer by identifying the specific attributes of those known as 'late adopters' or 'laggards', and thence tailoring and targeting information packages accordingly. The problem is that the ability of adoption studies to stratify farmers into meaningful categories based on their adoption behaviour has declined dramatically since the Second World War due to the normalisation of rapid technological change (Buttel *et al.* 1990) and the complexity of contemporary changes in farming practice (Lockie *et al.* 1995).

The stereotype of conservative Australian farmers plodding along doing what their fathers and grandfathers did is as big a myth about rural Australia as any. Race's (1999) recent analysis, for example, of barriers to involvement in farm forestry among Australian farmers demonstrates that the majority of these have little to do with the attributes or characteristics of individual farmers and far more to do with poor market conditions, uncertain economic benefits and dominance of the industry by large-scale growers and processors.

Nowadays, the key to economic prosperity in rural Australia is seen to depend not just on viable and technologically proficient primary industries, or government assistance, but on the ability of rural people to 'take the bull by the horns' and develop their own, regionally and locally-based, strategies for diversification, coordination and revitalisation—or, in other words, to help themselves (Herbert-Cheshire 2000).

Accordingly, the buzzwords of today are leadership, entrepreneurialism, bottom-up development, government-community partnerships, and so on. Most recently, the notion of 'social capital' has been popularised as a way to conceptualise the ways in which many of these other concepts hang together to either promote or stymie social and economic development.

Social capital refers to the networks, norms and trust that individuals, groups, organisations and communities draw on in their attempts to enhance learning, social mobility, economic growth, political efficacy or community vitality (Falk and Harrison 1998). Diversity, flexibility and inclusivity; acceptance of controversy and alternatives; and the ability to mobilise both public and private resources, have all been shown to enhance collective action for social and economic development (Flora *et al.* 1997). The concept of social capital helps to illustrate that investment in the quality of working relationships within communities is not an esoteric or luxury activity, but one that does lead to ongoing economic benefits (Lockie 2001a). Importantly, for our consideration here, investment in social capital can also produce environmental benefits by creating mechanisms and incentives for people to cooperate with each other to reduce environmental externalities (Pretty 1998).

Social capital—like leadership and partnership—can also become meaningless jargon used by governments and industry to justify leaving rural communities an ever-increasing responsibility to solve their own problems (Herbert-Cheshire 2000), while deflecting attention away from the impacts of government and industry policy and activities on those communities.

THE FLIES IN THE OINTMENT

Despite potential for cooption of the terminology, high levels of social capital would certainly appear to be a necessary prerequisite for the sort of horizontal and vertical coordination needed to implement integrated regional plantation forestry strategies. Social capital would also appear critical to rural revitalisation more generally. So what considerations do we need to take account of in moving these beyond meaningless jargon and into useful concepts for making a real difference to economic and natural resource management outcomes? This section argues that the first step involves an exploration of the political and economic environment within which rural communities are located; the social characteristics of those communities; and the extent and form of social change implicated by plantation forestry.

Losing control: the restructuring of rural Australia

For most of Australia's post-colonial history agricultural policy has largely subsumed rural policy (Sher and Sher 1994). As indicated above, Australian agricultural policy is strongly oriented to the removal of farmers from agriculture. With a fifth of Australian farmers doing well (producing half the total output and making commercial rates of return on investment) while the rest struggle for viability, the most economically rational policy appears to be adjustment of the sector to free up resources for those who can use them most productively (Higgins and Lockie 2001). But is agriculture just about making money, and what does this standard prognosis for Australian agriculture fail to acknowledge?

To start, there is an obvious failure to address the more widespread social and economic implications of adjustment for non-farming members of rural communities

(the 'dynamics of decline'), but there is also a failure to systematically consider on-farm alternatives to constant intensification. Farming has become a treadmill of constant technological innovation and resource-use intensification from which Australian farmers must inevitably, one by one, fall. While initiatives such as the Farm Forestry Program may appear to contradict this claim, arraigned against them are the vast bulk of agriculturally relevant policies and programs; from the structural adjustment elements of Agriculture Advancing Australia to the overt productivity focus of agri-science institutions (Lockie 2000). Most of what we 'know' about agriculture in Australia is about how to make it more industrialised. Further, through the dismantling of tariff protections, statutory marketing boards and so on, farmers are increasingly exposed to international marketplaces dominated by transnational agribusinesses bent on speeding up the treadmill even further (McMichael and Lawrence 2001).

An obvious corollary of the intensification treadmill is that those farmers most likely to benefit in the long-term from involvement in diversification strategies such as farm forestry are those least likely in the short-term to have the resources to do so. Meanwhile, those best-positioned in the short-term to invest in alternate enterprises are those with the least long-term incentive to do so.

While it is not the responsibility of plantation forestry proponents either to solve all the problems of rural Australia or to begin lobbying on the direction of agricultural policy, it is necessary for those proponents to be aware of the economic imperatives that are faced by so many of their potential neighbours or partners. Without short-term cashflow and long-term security over harvest rights it is very difficult to see farm forestry as an attractive option to large numbers of farmers. For many, as individuals, the option of selling their land to an industrial plantation operation may, in fact, be far more attractive despite any impacts this may have on other community members.

In other words, while in a 'big picture' sense all community members may be seen to have an interest in the development of integrated regional plantation forestry strategies that provide widespread benefits, individual short-term interests may be very different. Social capital—the networks and relationships that transform individuals into collectives—may help to balance collective and individual interests, but questions must still be raised regarding the extent to which rural community members can be expected to subordinate their own economic interests in the name of the common good.

Divergent interests: social relations and social change in rural communities

The term 'community' can be misleading; implying a homogeneity, sense of identity and commonality of interests that may not actually be true of people just because they live or work in proximity to each other (see Bourke 2001). As sociologists are so fond of pointing out, small towns, agricultural settlements etc are usually divided along numerous axes such as class, gender and enterprise mix. Access to land, capital and status are typically significant resources of power among rural people that indelibly shape the actions of institutions such as local government and community groups. Again, although people may share a generalised 'big picture' interest in a clean environment and vibrant community, their more immediate economic interests, and sense of the basis for local identity and culture, may be extremely divergent.

What is perhaps surprising though is that despite the numerous studies of community power to be found in the sociological literature of Australia and other developed nations (Bourke 2001)—including studies of community power and natural resource management initiatives such as Landcare (Lockie 2001b)—the literature on community structure and power in relation to plantation forestry is overwhelmingly based in the Third World. This is probably a reflection of the very different emphases in developed country and Third World approaches to plantation forestry. The former has, of course, focussed largely on industrial plantations while the latter has focussed—under the rubric of 'social forestry'—on widespread community participation and poverty alleviation. Nevertheless, if it is accepted that more integrated and diverse regional plantation forestry strategies are necessary in Australia if plantation forestry is to contribute to rural revitalisation, then it is also worth examining the literature on social forestry to identify lessons for Australia.

Social forestry has consistently been found to be neither class nor gender neutral (Nesmith 1991). It creates winners and losers and can thus be expected—irrespective of the noble intentions of project proponents—to encounter political opposition (Cernea 1993). Opposition may be focussed on any of a number of aspects; economic, environmental, social or cultural. If experience with social impact assessment in Australia is anything to go by, these last two dimensions of conflict will be the most difficult for project proponents to come to terms with due to their often subjective basis (Lockie *et al.* 1999). But given that: first, forestry activities can be expected to alter existing social structures; and second, the same tree or forest can mean different things to different social groups (Cernea 1993), they are not irrational bases for conflict and must be dealt with seriously.

Plantation forestry is a form of social engineering that is best not undertaken with vague and/or misleading definitions of the social actors involved (Cernea 1993). The price of not coming to terms with the full diversity of values, interests and existing forms of social organisation in target communities is project or strategy failure (Cernea 1990). Many social forestry projects that have genuinely tried to secure widespread community participation have failed anyway because they have not adequately considered the operation of power and privilege and how this might impact on project participation and outcomes. By themselves, community participation strategies may, in fact, offer little more than means for existing elites to strengthen their positions and accrue project benefits. It is not enough simply to adopt the terminology of 'social forestry' and 'community participation'. The mythical 'community' must be picked apart to specify the specific groups, classes, strata, castes and so on who comprise it, their interests in relation to the proposed project, their differential behaviour in relation to trees, and their relationships with each other (Cernea 1993). Participation may then become something more than the contribution of labour to tree planting and maintenance. The question is, how to develop effective planning, negotiation and decision-making strategies that enhance the relationships between these groups (that is, that build social capital) in order to secure successful and efficient outcomes.

THE GOOD NEWS

Just as it has been recognised that social scientists are indispensable team members in the design and implementation of Third World social forestry projects (the social sciences are also seen as basic elements of the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service's research and development program), so too must social scientists become more heavily involved in the development of integrated regional plantation forestry strategies in Australia. Given the political economic environment for agriculture and other rural enterprises it must be acknowledged that rural people will always face significant constraints on their ability to participate in plantation forestry. While plantation forestry proponents cannot be expected to solve all the problems of rural Australia, up-front investment in social research designed to understand target communities and establish a platform for negotiation between relevant interest groups has significant potential to reduce conflict and promote the realisation of benefits from forestry operations. Fortunately, well established models exist for undertaking such research that may readily be adapted to plantation forestry operations. Since 1996, considerable experience has been gained in the application of some of these to Australian native forests through the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) process and valuable lessons learned (Coakes and Fenton 2001).

RFAs and, no doubt, some plantation forestry operations have already been subjected to some form of social impact assessment (SIA). It is important to note though that a number of different SIA models are available, and it is not uncommon for SIA to be undertaken in a technocratic manner (focussing on the collection of demographic and other quantitative data for the consideration of experts) that limits participation and opportunities for reasoned debate and mutual compromise among stakeholders (Lockie 2001c). This is not always the intention at the beginning of the assessment process, but pressure to produce results both rapidly and suitable for integration with biophysical data often leads, in practice, to this outcome (Coakes and Fenton 2001)

Tools such as SIA, stakeholder analysis and social mapping are best, however, applied as participatory social research tools that document and feed back the values, interests, attitudes and aspirations of stakeholders to encourage mutual understanding and enhance negotiation and deliberation over genuine conflicts of interest. All people involved in or affected by a proposal should be regarded as stakeholders in that proposal.

Jennings and Lockie (2002a, 2002b), for example, adapt Dale and Lane's (1994) and Stolp *et al.'s* (2002) stakeholder analysis models to issues surrounding coastal management in Central Queensland. They apply these models through two recursive phases. The first involves the use of standard social research methods (face-to-face interviewing and document analysis) to explore with stakeholders their key values and aspirations regarding the coastal zone. This data is then used to construct a series of 'social maps' that attempt to show visually the relationships between stakeholders, with a particular focus on convergences and differences regarding key values and aspirations relative to specific coastal zone management issues or processes. These maps provide a starting point for discussion among stakeholders over areas of common and contested interest. The second stage uses these maps to begin identifying, with stakeholders, strategies to address areas of stakeholder conflict. As this will lead somewhat inevitably to changing relationships between stakeholders, and to changing understandings for individual stakeholders of their own interests and aspirations, it is vital that social maps are always understood as draft representations

of dynamic networks of social relationships. Progression of the research through these phases has enhanced mutual understanding among stakeholders and assisted in dispute resolution.

CONCLUSION

Realising the potential of plantation forestry to contribute to the revitalisation and well-being of rural communities—rather than contributing to the ongoing 'dynamics of decline'—is dependent on the development of strategies that simultaneously regenerate social, natural and economic capital. Such strategies may include integrated regional plantation forestry strategies that incorporate elements such as farm forestry and localised value-adding, while integrating with other natural resource planning initiatives such as farm and catchment planning. Achieving this kind of horizontal and vertical coordination itself depends on high levels of social capital. It is suggested here, however, that in contrast to much of the emphasis in rural policy on supporting social capital development by concentrating on the skills of individuals (leadership training etc), plantation forestry proponents act more directly to enhance relationships between themselves and other stakeholders, and among those stakeholders. Social capital exists, after all, only in relationships. In taking stakeholder participation and partnerships beyond the realm of jargon, plantation forestry proponents must adopt techniques to systematically define target groups and develop appropriate institutional arrangements for interaction with them. The engagement of appropriately resourced and qualified social researchers has considerable potential to help foresters to achieve this task and provide the basis for participation and negotiation among all stakeholders.

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