

Hancock gain FSC Certification

POLITICS & THE PULP MILL

In January 2004, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) granted Hancock Victorian Plantations FSC certification for their 250,000 hectare plantation/native forest lands throughout Victoria. The certification is the world's highest quality forest certification standard and took three years to work through. Friends of the Earth (FoE) Australia are members of the FSC and have supported FSC since its beginnings over 10 years ago as a long term strategy of getting logging companies out of old growth forests. Hancock become the first company to gain this certification in Australia.

FoE Forest Network has been embroiled in the Hancock saga for the past 5 years. We have worked on this issue when most other forest groups couldn't have cared less what happened in plantations - even those groups that were recommending plantations as a final solution for logging in native forests. We have also supported the work of Friends of Gippsland Bush (FOGB) who are living inside the middle of the supposed 'plantation dream/nightmare' in the Strzeleckis.. Not only have FOGB exposed the industry & conservation movement PR rhetoric that plantations are sustainable, they have also undermined industry initiatives such as the Timber Towns Accreditation Scheme (TTAS), which was based on the appalling model of the Tasmanian Forest Practices Board. TTAS was designed to take power from local community interests on private land, further entrenching it into the hands of selected industry/government groups in Victoria. Apart from FoGB and FoE no other forest group in the State has consistently bothered to catalogue and expose private forestry plantation issues. Eg Hancock Watch: www.hancock.forests.org.au

This gives FoE a unique perspective on the plantation debate. On one hand it is very disappointing that Hancock should be certified at all. Many of the plantations now certified were established many years ago under extremely lax (often non-existent) environmental guidelines. Many of the plantations were established by the destruction of old growth forests and associated aerial application of 245-T (mixed with diesel) into domestic drinking water supplies. The damage on the Victorian landscape was (and still is) enormous. Waterways are often trashed and thousands of tonnes of sediment can be displaced during the logging operations, with the health of soils and waterways suffering significantly. Aerial spraying of plantations still occurs in domestic water supply catchments. The fact that 'green groups' have endorsed such poor land management without qualification is a disgrace.

World Rainforest Movement has recently written an excellent critique of FSC in its role of certifying tree plantations. Entitled 'Certifying the Uncertifiable' (www.wrm.org.uy). The book argues that it is totally inappropriate to certify plantations which by their very nature are unsustainable. This argument is also represented in Victoria by a minority of forest campaign groups who do not support industrial plantations or industrial forestry models. They argue that plantations in their region, need to be replanted as native forests in order to bring back natural processes. This view also occurs within FoE Melbourne, however the reality of Hancock certification includes long term supply licenses to supply radiata pine to various industries located throughout regional Victoria - eg Dominance Industries in Wangaratta, Carter Holt Harvey in Myrtleford, Australian Newsprint Mills in Albury, AKD in Colac, Boral in Tumbarumba (NSW) etc and perhaps most importantly PaperlinX in Gippsland who Hancock supply with plantation pine and 'hardwood'. Replanting of all of these plantations with native species is just not going to happen.

FSC assessors, Smartwood, observed first hand the problems that groups such as FoE and

Friends of Gippsland Bush have been reporting and monitoring in plantations since 1996. The approach used by Smartwood in their assessment of Hancock was one that aimed to get the best management regimes in place in already existing plantations. Both FoE and FoGB were happy with Smartwood and their Assessment team.

If Hancock failed to attain certification, the same old problems of environmental degradation would remain - potentially forever. With the FSC carrot however, there is now constant pressure on the company to improve its operations. If the company doesn't comply then it can lose its certification - which in turn would be a major embarrassment to the company and perhaps more importantly its investors.

There are diverging views within the forest 'movement' about FSC. The biggest disagreement between forest campaigners is over the continued logging of native forests. Increasingly, voices calling for no native forest logging (NNFL) are attempting to exert pressure on all parties to 'tow the line'. NNFL arguments have long been articulated academically by the economist Judy Clark. Clarks' arguments have received unbridled support by the NNFL clique, including the Wilderness Society, Victorian Greens, Environment East Gippsland and Australian Conservation Foundation. Groups supporting initiatives such as Small Scale Regional Ecoforestry or groups working on Community Based Forestry are mostly dismissed, undermined or ignored by (NNFL) supporters. In turn NNFL groups remain silent about plantation issues such as spraying pesticides in domestic water catchments, use of fertilisers contaminated with heavy metals, impact of treated timber on human health, impacts on waterways etc.

As a way to find a solution about plantation management issues, FoE and some other forest groups have supported the independent certification of plantations by the FSC. Where FoE differs from NNFL advocates, is that FoE Melbourne argues that FSC should also look at the certification of native forests. Our argument here is that ENGO's have no other mechanism at their disposal that could effectively put a brake on all forest logging throughout Victoria*. The State Government has no plans to stop logging in native forests. Victoria's biggest native forest logger PaperlinX has its own Act of Parliament which allows it to continue logging native forests until the year 2030. Blockades, whilst effective, can only stop logging in small selected areas and require high turnovers of personnel and can polarise local communities (eg Goolengook blockade lasted 5 years, arguably diverting resources and thousands of people from other old growth areas). Over 400 coupes were logged in Victoria in 2003. How can ENGO's blockade every coupe? Do we even want to? Under FSC at least we can state the absolute no go areas (eg old growth forests) and be fairly confident that loggers will not go into those places. The current status quo often means that huge tracts of Old Growth are clearfelled - (*although OREN was successful in stopping logging in the Otways by 2008, the logging volumes were smaller in scale compared to the politics of confronting a pulp mill as is the case in Central Gippsland. The social and economic realities of the Otways are also substantially different to Gippsland).

Constant monitoring by FoE and FoGB of Hancock has paid off in that Smartwood has prepared a 6 page list of 30 conditions and pre-conditions that Hancock must meet in order to keep the FSC certificate (see: <http://www.smartwood.org/reports/pdfs/hancock-victorian-plantations.pdf>). Many of these conditions relate to positive initiatives beyond the existing Code of Forest Practice, such as the replanting of buffers in critical stream catchments, not using Simazine unless a Pesticide Advisory Group is established, publicly announcing herbicide regimes, looking at impacts of truck haulage routes, revegetation of steep slopes, protection of sensitive waterways etc. It was disappointing however that the certification seemed to ignore issues of rainforest definition and buffer zones, however it is FoE's assertion that Hancock will have to significantly 'lift its game' in order to keep the certification.

Other complicating factors also emerge. It became evident that the push for FSC was not coming from Hancock in Melbourne. The push was coming from the US, where Hancock investors (largely teachers pension funds) wanted to invest only in plantation operations that achieve FSC. The company in Melbourne was also under pressure from the Australian timber industry who want nothing more than to stop FSC gaining a foothold in Australia.

Australian forest companies have come up with their own certification standard the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS). With FSC, stakeholders such as conservationists have input into the process. This does not occur via the AFS and FoE argues that AFS was established directly to undermine and negate the work of FSC. If Hancock failed to gain FSC accreditation, that would leave the doors wide open for AFS, which is nothing more for a continuation of clearfelling of old growth forests. ENGO criticism of FSC will also play into the hands of the timber industry interests pushing for the AFS.

Complicating things again is the fact that in regards to Hancock there is also the argument that many of the supposed hardwood plantations in the Strzeleckis should actually be set aside as a National Park - because the indigenous plantations were not planted but were the result of natural regeneration. This position has been articulated by campaigners from South Gippsland since 1998 who have a list of 7000 signatures supporting their proposal. Other Gippsland forest groups, do not necessarily support the National Park proposal, meaning that even within localised forest groups there are disagreements over long term future for the Strzelecki forests. On one level the National Park sounds good, but the political reality is very much different. The State Government has no interest in 'buying back' the same forests and plantations that it 'sold off' in 1998.

The problem with the FSC certification now is that NNFL groups who 10 years ago were supporting Judy Clarks' models, saying that hardwood plantations in the Strzeleckis could provide almost all of the Maryvale Pulp Mills hardwood requirements, are now supporting the 30,000 Strzelecki National Park argument saying that many of these areas should not be logged at all! Under the conservation agenda of 1995 - as determined by the economist Judy Clark, the Strzelecki eucalypt plantations were by 1999 supposed to be supplying 242,820 m3 of eucalypt woodchips per annum. Clark also stated that projected wood volumes of 369,816 m3 per annum of eucalypt woodchips would be available by 2000-2004, increasing to 401,718 m3 by 2005-2009. By 2010-14 this would increase again to 516,864m3 " it is estimated that Amcor could immediately shift to sourcing 80% of its Maryvale wood resource from plantations". Australia's Plantations July 1995 Judy Clark.

Under the FSC Smartwood assessment Jan 2004, it states p11 that "Hancock supply 255,000m3 of Mt Ash, with 15,000m3 of bluegum per year". This wood is sourced from the Strzeleckis - meaning that a current shortfall from Strzelecki hardwood plantations of almost 100,000 m3 (27+% of total) on the expected volumes predicted by Clark 00-04 and close to 130,000 m3 (32+% of total) short of what Clark predicted for 05-09. So much for the hypothesis that Strzelecki hardwood plantations would be the panacea for native forest logging!

The fact that Clark and most forest ENGO's supported concentrating the entire Victorian fine paper industry into the highly erodible Cretaceous Sediments that cover many steep slopes of the Strzeleckis and associated heavy reliance of chemicals and fertilisers does not leave one with much enthusiasm. To now almost completely reverse that position 10 years later leaves massive credibility gaps in those groups that supported Clark and now support the National Park proposal. The timber industry must think this is hilarious and many people in the forest 'movement' will be equally upset by this overt kneejerk backflip!

Meanwhile PaperlinX continue to log native forests to the tune of 500,000 m3 per year and could

increase this to 1.2 million m3 per annum in the near future with the building of a new pulp mill at Maryvale. This logging nightmare may well most likely extend to into East Gippsland. Where do NNFL advocates propose that PaperlinX source their eucalypt fibre from given that there is a 100,000+m3 shortfall in their plantation estimations? Where do NNFL groups supporting the 30,000 ha National Park propose that PaperlinX source their logs from given that most of the Strzeleckis would be 'taken out' of the equation? The answer of course will be the more intensive management of native forests in the Central Highlands, Central Gippsland and East Gippsland. The Strzelecki National Park will mean 30-40 year old Mountain Ash will be set aside from logging, only to allow for more intensive forestry in 60-90+ year forests elsewhere.

FoE has not supported the calls for the National Park, but we have supported the calls for an 8000 ha Cores and Linkages Proposal which will see 2000 ha of supposed plantation set aside from logging in the core rainforest catchments of the Strzeleckis. This proposal is based on a study conducted by Biosis in November 2001 and has major support of local government, local community and ENGO's - including National Park supporters. Arguably, FSC has helped put the brakes on the logging of these core areas in the Strzeleckis, although some of the linkage areas are not as yet, safe from logging. A large portion of the linkage areas were planted and for Hancock to support the Cores and Linkages Proposal they will have to 'hand over' several thousand hectares of 'forest/plantation. This is a more politically sensible option than calling for the whole region to be classified as a National Park, but it is a highly difficult exercise, especially with existing pressures on Hancock to meet supply contracts for the PaperlinX pulp mill.

Problems emerge in the Strzeleckis when attempting to define areas that were planted with Mountain Ash by the State Government and APM between the 1950's and 1980's. To formally request all of these areas be locked up in a National Park is unrealistic. FoE has maps outlining the planted areas within the Hancock estate. FoE and FoGB have worked very hard to keep Hancock within these planted boundaries, which has been the basis of our coupe monitoring work for 7 years (No other groups, including National Park lobbyists have conducted this on the ground work as extensively as FoE and FoGB). 5 years ago Hancock were logging non-planted hardwood when they logged their plantations. This practice has mostly stopped but it is full time job to keep an eye on all current logging operations. This also means that FSC will not work successfully unless community groups monitor what is happening.

Hancock has a current policy that it does not log native forests. The Biosis study did not include all the Strzeleckis - missing out on the eastern side and the northern slopes due to lack of funding. FoE would argue that much of the Strzeleckis, particularly the eastern Strzeleckis would never be logged by Hancock as these areas are clearly native forests. Old growth and rainforest would also not be logged by Hancock. These areas could be included into a park system, but the political will of the State Government just isn't there at the present time to support a Park.

It appears that forest groups willing to shoot down the FSC certification at any cost may well help fuel the destruction of forests in the Strzeleckis, East Gippsland and the Central Highlands. FoE & FoGB would now argue that without FSC even the cores and links proposal will be at risk. FoE also argues that what State Government in their right mind would create a National Park out of the main 'resource' that was earmarked for the pulp mill based at Maryvale? Talk about stirring up the biggest logging hornets nest in Victoria - possibly Australia!

FSC won't save everything, but it is a reasonable outcome considering what was stacked against it. By arguing for a 30,000 ha National Park, ENGO's will simply be opening the logging floodgates elsewhere. For people arguing that a closure of the Maryvale pulp mill is the only remaining option, consider that this would mean a 700,000 m3 increase in paper sourced from PaperlinX's biggest and cheapest competitor, sourced primarily from the tropical rainforests of Sumatra! Other hardwood plantation options are highly unlikely and may include young bluegum

from Western Australia or Shining Gum from Tasmania. Bluegum plantations in Brazil may also be a dim possibility, however what are the ethics of importing pulp from Brazil and from plantations which have come under protest by local indigenous people and landholders? Is this practice sustainable?

FoE will continue to argue for a fine paper industry based on recycled and sustainably produced pulp. We will also call for overall reduced consumption of forest products as a necessary element of reducing our impacts on natural systems. We will work with other ENGO's to ensure protection of high conservation forests around the state and seek solutions that don't just push forest destruction into other places like Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. FSC will allow for continued logging in the Strzeleckis in 2004 at volumes 30% less than what the conservation movement was recommending less than 10 years ago. It may also hold the key to keeping the woodchippers out of key Strzelecki rainforest catchments. In terms of the Central Highlands, it may now be worth pulling the bull by the horns and look seriously at FSC certification in of native forests in the Central Highlands and Gippsland. At least this way ENGO's can have a say in areas they want set aside, which is in complete opposition to the situation we have now. NNFL groups should understand that native forest logging will be here to stay and rather than ignore it and hope that it goes away, work positively to reduce the impacts of both the native forest and plantation industries.

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