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Communities and Participatory Forest Management

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**SESSION: MEETING THE DEMAND FOR
FORESTS AND FOREST PRODUCTS TO 2020:
ISSUES FOR DEVELOPMENT AND AUSTRALIA**

Communities and Participatory Forest Management

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Forest management which is more inclusive of the interests of local people has been one of the central foci of forestry globally for the past 25 years. Countries in which there is a strong dependency between people and forests, such as Nepal, have been at the forefront of this more participatory forest management, which is closely associated with devolution of State authority over forests. The participatory management paradigm recognises both the potential of local people and the limits of central government for sustainable forest management. A second generation of participatory forest management is now emerging, drawing on the diverse experiences and mixed outcomes of the first generation; increasingly, it recognises the need for synergistic collaboration between different interests if participatory modes of forest management are to deliver the outcomes sought by different interests. While there has been strong public participation in Australian forest policy for the past 25 years, and

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while Australian foresters have often been at the forefront of participatory forestry initiatives abroad, it is only very recently that forms of participatory forest management have been introduced to Australia. As elsewhere, participatory forest management has the potential to better satisfy community aspirations and needs of forests, but — like other modes of sustainable forest management — its success requires an enabling policy framework, substantial interdisciplinary inputs, very functional collaboration between different interests, and long-term political and resource commitment.

Introduction

The topic of communities and forests is one that is implicit in all forestry activities, as Jack Westoby said very emphatically (Westoby 1987). Often, though, that relationship is treated only implicitly rather than explicitly — as if it is connected only to the high level of policy rather than to more day-to-day forest management decisions.

In contrast, community forest management explicitly and directly involves local communities in decisions about forest management, and usually in the forest management activities themselves. It is a very challenging topic for forests, forestry and foresters everywhere. It relates very much to topics that Brian Belcher and Dennis Garrity have already covered. And so in this brief presentation I will give you just a snapshot of how I see some of the key issues.

I'll briefly discuss the context, history and rationale of community forest management, some of the experiences and issues, and some of the challenges that we face. Many of you will find no news in this, but that doesn't diminish the importance of the issues.

A diversity of forms

I will cite three examples to illustrate the diversity of what I mean by community and forest management:

- Nepal — a forest user group may meet to decide how community forest resources, for which that community group is responsible, should be managed.
- South Africa — women may participate in community council initiatives in partnership with government, for example around plantation forests, to develop commercial activities based on forest nurseries.
- Canberra — following the 2003 bushfires here, which had a very profound impact on our city, there has been a very strong and active partnership between the community, forest agencies, and the NGO Greening Australia, in reforestation.

A focus on communities

These diverse situations are united by a focus on communities: in Jack Westoby's 1967 words: 'ultimately forestry is not about trees, it is about people; it is about what people want from trees' (Westoby 1987).

Rights

'Communities' is a word that has many dimensions and hides many complexities. Indigenous communities are the original custodians and managers of forests and other natural resources. In Australia, the Aboriginal people had that role.

Historically, however, indigenous people's rights, community's rights, to forests and other resources have often been appropriated — for example during European colonisation, or during national development processes. There have been exceptions — for example, in most Melanesian countries, traditional rights were generally maintained as those countries found independence.

In those parts of the world where communities lost their rights to forest, those rights are now being restored. Recent work (Scherr *et al.* 2002) suggests that nearly a quarter of the forests in the poorer world are now managed directly by indigenous and

local communities. In the so-called developed world, that figure is only about 3%.

Like any other form of forest management, community-based forest management presents both challenges and opportunities, and there are many initiatives attempting to respond to both those challenges and opportunities.

Motivation

A conjunction of forces underlies the reasons why community forest management is becoming more rather than less important. One of those is the political imperative of subsidiarity, or decentralisation and devolution in relation to natural resources, as well as in other arenas of human activity. There are both plus and minus factors in decentralisation and devolution. The plus factors are the recognition — as we heard from Brian Belcher for example — that involving local people is likely to make the outcomes more sustainable. There are often also negative factors that diminish the capacity of government to support forest management.

In some places there has been a conscious agenda to restore rights to people who have been dispossessed. That has been the case in Australia — at least until recently. In addition, the changing emphasis of management away from industrial scale, industrially focused wood production to a broader range of products and services may favour a community-based approach. Finally, partnership approaches that build a broad platform of support for forest management are much more likely to be sustainable in the long term than others.

The first aspiration for more community-orientated forest management is that the outcomes will be more sustainable, both for forests and for people. Second, much of the work in community forest management had a very strong emphasis on improving local livelihoods and, as Brian has noted, this has many dimensions. Lastly, some of that shift in thinking has been motivated by the recognition that governments have many demands on their resources, and if some responsibilities and costs can be transferred elsewhere and the resources thus freed up used on higher-priority tasks, then that might be a very sensible public policy direction.

Examples of community forest management

I will describe some different forms of community forest management to illustrate a really important point — that there is no standard menu or recipe here, but rather locally-adapted responses appropriate to particular circumstances.

The original model is co-management with local communities. This has been taking place in Nepal and India in particular, but also elsewhere, since about 1980, focusing very much on localising decision-making and having the government playing a facilitating rather than a directing role. It is important to note in this forum that Australian development assistance, Australian professionals — both foresters and from other disciplines — have historically played some important roles in the development of these approaches, particularly but not only through the AusAID Nepal-Australia projects that have run over the last 25 years or so. In Australia, that model is best developed in our national park and indigenous protected areas systems: originally the joint Commonwealth–Northern Territory national parks of Uluru and Kakadu. More recently, co-management with Aboriginal people is also expanding across national park networks in Australian states.

In relation to forests in particular, Australia has been slow in coming to community-based forest management. The best-known initiative is taking place in the wonderfully named Wombat Forest in Victoria (Poynter 2005). There are also other initiatives with elements of community participation, such as the New South Wales western region forest agreement. The title of the recent Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement echoes the sentiment of management for communities.

Much as Brian has commented, I see evolution taking place in the way we are thinking about community forest management: it is now moving into more market-oriented business development activities. It is also moving beyond livelihoods, into and beyond the poverty net approach that Brian talked about, to actually helping make people better off in a substantive way.

A good example of this that has involved Australia peripherally is in South Africa, where a project conducted by their CSIR (the equivalent of Australia's CSIRO) is working with local communities, in this case to establish, manage and

undertake all the work associated with the production of genetically superior seed for their commercial plantation industry. This function is one that has been traditionally done entirely by government or industry, and here it is being done in a very conscious partnership between the government research provider and previously-disadvantaged communities. It provides an interesting example of the way in which more community-orientated approaches to forest management are evolving.

Finally, I wish to return to the immediate local environment of those of us who live and work in the ACT, or are at least based here. Many of us participated in the development and conduct of an ongoing partnership to re-green the Australian Capital Territory, involving the community directly in activities associated with restoration and rehabilitation after the very devastating bushfires that we had in 2003 (Bartlett *et al.* 2005).

Conclusion

An adaptive learning environment is a necessity if initiatives in relation to communities and forest management are to succeed. Familiar principles are relevant here, because community forest management is really about policy and management processes; it is about creating enabling environments at both the policy and community levels.

To enable community forest management, we have to build a coalition of support to discover and achieve shared goals, and to develop processes for sharing power, and for making implementing decisions. Consider a process that began to do that in Western New South Wales, where about 25 different groups have interests in the forests of that region. Some of those interests are directly consumptive — some people depend for their livelihoods on the forests — and others are more related to the environmental services provided by those forests. As with any other activity in natural resource management, this form of management demands resources, and securing and sustaining those resources has proved particularly challenging.

Similarly, we need to build communities' capacity to engage in and manage their forests. We need to do that in terms of the way they think about the task, and develop the ways that professionals work with communities to help them achieve their goals. We can help reconcile what are almost the inevitable tensions between basic livelihoods or income

generation goals, on the one hand, and conservation or environmental services goals on the other.

These tensions are seldom easy to resolve. I think, for example, of the predicament of people in the nations to our north and north-east, who are tempted to sell, or have sold, their forests. With no resources that have any value in financial terms other than their forests, with no governmental capacity to provide basic infrastructure services such as health and education, they face an unenviable dilemma.

Finally, community-based management can be confronting politically. Those of us that have worked in the Australian forest arena, and the many here who work internationally, know this well. It can be confronting for professionals trying to engage with communities, and — as many others have written — it requires a real paradigm shift in our thinking about our role. It can be confronting for forest and other government agencies, who find that their authority is being superseded by that of local communities. So community forest management does pose some really big institutional challenges for us, and one of those is sustaining the political commitment we need to deliver sustainable outcomes for forests and for people.

These, then, are the central challenges that face us all in working towards more community-oriented forest management. We can take heart from the experiences over the last 25 years or so, and continue that adaptive learning process for the benefit of both forests and people.

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