

OPINION

Clear-felling the Future

Rossllyn Beeby "Canberra Times" 9 February 2008

When the first fleet arrived on Australia's eastern shores in 1788, George Worgan, the surgeon in the Sirius wrote in his journal that the landscape was "beautifully clothed with a variety of verdures of evergreens."

Most new arrivals after that shared that first flush of enthusiasm for the new British colony's bushland.

Captain Watkin Tench described his delight at spending an evergreen winter among huge spreading trees "of tropical luxuriancy "that lacked the "sickly autumnal tint which marks English trees"." A few years later, settlers at Parramatta wrote letters to relatives in Britain, enthusing over the beauty of the "lofty trees", pungent scent and colourful flowers of the NSW eucalyptus forests.

But barely 30 years later – perhaps coinciding with the arrival of those intent on making their fortunes from colonial pastoral holdings – the mood changed in some quarters. It became fashionable to bash the bush.

In 1820, NSW surveyor-general John Oxley grumbled "one tree, one soil, one water and one description of bird, fish or animal prevails alike for 10 miles and for one hundred."

Austrian diplomat and amateur botanist Baron Charles von Hugel visited John Macarthur's Camden farm in 1833 and thought the Australian bush drab and unappealing to those of refined aesthetic tastes. "One can honestly say that one often rides through the woods without seeing a single tree which would be allowed to remain standing in a park in Europe," he wrote.

Even Charles Darwin, who visited Australia in 1836, thought the bush "desolate and untidy."

Australian National University art historian and environmental lawyer Dr Tim Bonhady offers a wealth of stories of those early conflicting attitudes to the Australian Bush in *The Colonial Earth*. Some well-heeled settlers found the bush alienating, hostile and oppressive. Others like Alexander Macleay, the first NSW Colonial Secretary, thought it a naturalist's paradise.

British landscape painter John Glover admired eucalyptus forests as a "painter's delight". Arthur Streeton, on the other hand, wasn't one to let trees get in the way of a good view from his easel.

In 1886, Streeton was working outdoors on the Hawkesbury River, "painting what became *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might*, when a local roadmender called Ned Hogan accosted him carrying an axe," writes Bonhardy.

According to Streeton's memoirs, Hogan asked, "Ain't them trees in your way?" Streeton replied that they were indeed. Hogan's axe "rose with mighty sweeps and with a few blows the trees crashed down the precipice and unveiled a perfect view."

Melbourne architect Robin Boyd described this zeal for land clearing as an innate "arborophobia" dating from the "cult of the pioneer" in *The Australian Ugliness*.

Despite recent political promises and more than two centuries of intense public lobbying to save Australia's forests and woodlands, land clearing remains Australia's most contentious – and unresolved – conservation issue.

"We still don't seem to get it. As recently as 2000 Australia had the sixth highest rate of land clearing in the world and was the only country in the top 20 land-clearing nations with a developed first-world economy," says ANU ecologist Professor David Lindenmayer.

"We don't seem to question the notion that we must clear more land for urban growth, and environmental problems remain the same whether it's clearing woodlands near Albury or coastal heathlands at Vincentia for holiday homes."

Earlier this week, the federal Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong released a policy paper outlining details of a new mandatory greenhouse emissions and energy consumption reporting system to come into effect in July.

Australian businesses will be required to submit emissions reports for the 2008-2009 financial year, with the first audits due by October 31 2009.

The reporting system includes corporate road freight and passenger transport, aircraft, pipelines, electricity distribution, car fleets, commercial buildings and mining.

Forestry and agriculture, producing 25% of Australia's emissions, are exempt.

The report claims emissions audit methods are "not sufficiently developed" for these sectors. Until new calculations and reporting methods are developed, farm and forestry emissions will be "considered zero".

Australian Greens Leader Bob Brown has described these exemptions as "a bad sign of things to come for the Australian environment".

"It shows the Rudd Government is building a carefully studied ignorance into its climate change policy to defend logging of Australia's forests. But they can't be serious about climate change if Australia's deforestation emissions are not on the agenda."

Lindenmayer says it "makes no sense at all" to exclude greenhouse emissions from agricultural and forestry land clearing from the compulsory reporting scheme. It's bizarre and it's just putting off the inevitable. The carbon budget has to be done if we're going to move out of logging old growth forests and into sustainable forestry plantations."

He's concerned governments may be planning to count forestry plantations as carbon offsets, ignoring the short-term nature of these resources and the carbon footprint of activities required to establish them.

"You've got to clear vegetation, expose the soil, do deep-ripping with a bulldozer, fly over these forests and spray them with herbicides, do thinning, then clear-fell the plantation and start all over again. There are a lot of steps in the process that don't make plantations carbon-neutral. The last thing we want is plantations being used as a Clayton's carbon offset."

(To rephrase the catchy advertising slogan from the 1970's non-alcoholic drink, "it's the offset you have when you're not having an offset")

Darwin based river systems ecologist Dr Stuart Blanch says land clearing requires a similar scale political effort to national water reform. "There are hundreds of thousands of hectares of land still being illegally cleared, and in the past, prosecutions have been difficult to secure," he says.

"The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act doesn't apply to land clearing – it doesn't trigger the Act: which can make court actions quite complex. We need to define a role for federal and state governments in the same way as we're doing with a national water policy. We need national standards to control clearing."

Blanch, who heads WWF Australia's northern conservation campaigns, says recent research estimates 33% of Australia's terrestrial carbon stocks are in its tropical savannas.

"It's a wall-to-wall carbon store up here from Cairns to Broome, but the north is facing the risk of future clearing for pastoral expansion and biofuels. In a carbon constrained world needing to significantly reduce emissions by 2020, northern Australia should be protected and developed as a valuable carbon store, not cleared for short-term gain."

Blanch says it's vital to end large-scale land clearing in areas such as the Daly River and Tiwi Islands to reduce greenhouse emissions. Clearing and burning tropical savannas currently releases 160 tonnes of carbon dioxide on average in wetter areas of northern Australia and the land would be more valuable if managed by indigenous communities for carbon sequestration.

"Australia could stabilize greenhouse emissions by 2010 if we made serious efforts to reduce land clearing. It's the quickest route to the deepest cuts we could make."

Blanch says governments need to introduce a mix of financial incentives for farmers – not compensation – that "make it financially rewarding not to clear the land." These could include stewardship payments, tax concessions and government extension services to assist farmers to manage weeds, feral animals and fire risk. As for urban clearing, he suggests "mandatory 100% carbon and biodiversity offsets are non-negotiable."

In a letter last November to Fiona Wain, chief executive of Environment Business Australia, Kevin Rudd outlined Labor's "action agenda to tackle climate change". It included a national emissions trading scheme "to include the agricultural sector", which would assign commercial value to "biological sequestration of carbon", provide incentives to reduce further land clearing and ban imports of unsustainably produced biofuels and illegally logged tropical timbers.

"Labor is opposed to broad-scale and unregulated land clearing" said the document accompanying Rudd's letter. "Labor will introduce national standards to strictly regulate approvals for land clearing, and will insist that funding of State, Territory and landholder projects is conditional upon States, Territories and local government introducing appropriate clearing controls."

The Federal Government has yet to release details of its proposed national standards or to clarify how funding would be tied to clearing controls.

Last October, University of Queensland ecologist Dr Clive McAlpine and Jozef Syktus, principal scientist with the Queensland Natural Resources and Water Department, published a study showing that 150 years of land clearing had contributed significantly to the warming and drying of eastern Australia.

"We were able to show the 2002-2003 El Nino drought in eastern Australia was on average two degrees hotter because of land clearing," Dr McAlpine says. "Clearing has changed the ocean currents around Australia because of factors such as changes to surface roughness, wind speeds and pressure systems. It's too simplistic to attribute climate change purely to greenhouse gasses."

He believes the contribution of land clearing to climate change is "serious enough for a moratorium on all land clearing."

Despite decades of scientific evidence showing the adverse environmental impacts of land clearing, it's still "too easy for anyone to get permission to clear land", he says

McAlpine and Syktus found mean summer rainfall had decreased by between 4% and 12% in eastern Australia and by between 4% and 8% in those areas of Australia that had been most extensively cleared. "Only a few people profit from these developments, and they should be made to put that profit back into the environment or into research."

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