

Socio-political issues in forestry



Geography



Lesson information

Level:	Junior secondary school Years 7 – 10
Duration:	2 lessons
Summary:	Students will discover some of the key socio-political factors relating to Australian forestry and learn how these relate to land use and the impact of native forest management. They will be provided with information to help develop a balanced understanding of how forestry works to minimise its social and environmental impacts through sustainable forest management and certification.



What are socio-political issues?

- These are public concerns that have social and political impacts such as economic, environmental and cultural consequences that require ethical and responsible solutions.

Humans depend upon the environment for survival, however differences in world views and belief systems from place to place influence human relationships and interactions with the environment. The examination of socio-political issues helps develop a more holistic (connected) understanding of human dependence on the environment for making informed decisions on sustainable patterns of living.

Socio-political issues in Australian forestry

There are many socio-political considerations when discussing forestry in Australia. Some of the issues can be considered controversial as various groups and individuals have opposing views on the role of our forests and how our forests should be managed. These views are based on different perspectives and preference given to environmental, social, economic and cultural values of forests. Some of these are listed in the diagram below.



Issues around forestry

Environmental	Economic	Cultural	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• renewable resource• biodiversity conservation• fire hazard• feral animals• weed control• soil & water quality• pesticides• impact of alternative materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• wood supply• carbon storage• processing & manufacturing• value adding• employment• markets• roads & bridges• ownership changes• tax laws• land prices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• protecting sacred sites• recreational use• community & volunteer organisations• non-timber forest product rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• land-use change• visual appeal• tourism• lifestyle• sense of community• policy & codes of practice• standards certification



What are forests?

Forests are areas dominated by trees that grow to over 2 metres in height and have a crown cover of 20% or greater. Forests cover around 19% of the Australian continent, accounting for 4% of the world's forest area. That equates to 147.4 million hectares of native forests and 2.0 million hectares of forestry plantations (DAFF, 2012), and so is a very significant type of land cover. Native forests are dominated by trees from Australia and include the eucalypts, acacias, casuarinas, mallee, melaleucas and many rainforest species. In contrast, exotic trees originate from overseas, and include the major plantation softwood pine, *Pinus radiata*.

Old growth and native forests

A lack of understanding of the difference between old growth forest and native forest is at the centre of the political debate. Most groups accept that old growth forest that has high conservation value should be reserved. However, there is debate about what is old growth and whether particular forest areas have high conservation value.

Old growth forests are native forests that are mature and have not been previously harvested, cleared or disturbed. Ecologically they consist of:

- a canopy of overstorey trees;
- a well-developed understory of emerging trees and smaller species and shrubs;
- dead standing trees that have died of old age;
- a forest floor with decaying and hollow logs; and
- rich biodiversity of flora and fauna species as well as fungi and bacteria.

Australia has around 5.03 million hectares of 'old growth forest'. This accounts for around 3.5% of the total native forest area. Of the listed 'old growth forest', approximately 73% are protected in designated nature conservation reserves.

Some native forests, which have been harvested in the past, have regrown so well that the disturbance is not evident, and the biological diversity has recovered to pre-harvest levels so that the forest once again has high conservation value.





Bushfires and their impacts

Hot, dry and windy summers in south-eastern Australia often lead to frequent and intense bushfires that can lead to loss of property and human lives. In the northern states and territories where the climate is generally humid, fires tend to be low-intensity and not as damaging. Bushfires have caused the most recent losses of old growth forests and large tracts of native forests in Australia. Bushfires have also caused devastating losses to:

- human lives;
- livestock and wildlife;
- rural houses, fences and farm buildings;
- pasture, regrowth and plantation forest;
- homes and buildings in urban and industrial areas; and
- bridges and power lines

Bushfires can also cause a rise in CO₂ emissions, which can vary enormously depending on the severity of the fire season. For example, the 2006/07 Great Divide fires in Victoria released an estimated 20 to 40 million tonnes of CO₂, and the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires released 8.5 million tonnes of CO₂ (2009, Vic Bushfires Royal Commission Report)



Top to bottom:

Sheep yards destroyed in 2009 Victorian Black Saturday fires

Burnt out vehicle

Bee hives (apiaries) destroyed by bushfire

Koala injured in bushfire

Left: Forest destroyed by bushfire



Forest Classifications

Forests tend to be classified under tenure (i.e. ownership), and include:

- multiple use forests (6% of total area),
- nature conservation reserves (15%),
- privately owned forests (26%),
- leasehold forests (44%), and
- other (9%).

Multiple-use public forests are managed by the crown for a range of purposes including timber harvesting, recreation, water supply, conservation and environmental protection and managing the social, environmental and economic needs and benefits is often a balancing act.

Sustainable Forest Management

- Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) was developed as a method to balance social, environmental and economic impacts of forestry.

Strict regulatory guidelines and codes of practice ensure disturbances are kept to a minimum during harvesting to produce an annual volume of wood, while preserving the local environment and maintaining cultural values.

Sustainably managed forests can be certified under the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) or the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and wood from these forests can be traced through the value adding chain to consumers.

Biodiversity

A major biodiversity issue is the threat to native flora and fauna through loss of habitat caused by permanent clearing of forests for agriculture, roads, dams and urban development.

- Sustainable forest management is not land clearing. The forest manager is responsible for ensuring our production forests are managed sustainably with minimal impact to biodiversity, and preserving high conservation areas for habitat.



Sustainable Forest Management ensures biodiversity is maintained. Trees are harvested either by selective harvesting where individual trees (or small patches of trees) are removed or clearcutting a larger area or 'coupe' where most of the trees are removed. In most cases, a clear cut will retain a prescribed number of old hollow bearing trees must be kept to continue providing habitat for a range of animal species such as parrots, bats, cockatoos and some reptiles. After trees are harvested, forests regrow either through natural regeneration from seeds already on the forest floor, aerially spread or through replanting seedlings. When the regrowth forest matures, research has shown that biodiversity levels return to levels they were before trees were harvested over time.



Questions

1. Select one of the issues from the diagram on page 1 and discuss your understanding of how it could be controversial between groups with different views and belief systems?

2. What is the difference between an 'old growth forest' and a native forest? Can you describe some of the major environmental benefits of preserving 'old growth forests'? Can you describe some of the benefits of harvesting native forests?

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3. What are some of the potential impacts of bushfires?

4. Discuss some of the benefits of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) to society.

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5. What is the aim of preserving old hollow trees in sustainably managed forests?

6. Read the media article on the next page from the Sydney Morning Herald on the social-political debate surrounding some of Tasmania's forests. The article highlights the difficulty in resolving issues around forest management when different groups have opposing views.

Then answer the questions on page 7.



End in sight for Tasmania's forest wars

SMH, August 15, 2012 By Andrew Darby

Marathon talks to end Tasmania's forest wars are approaching final agreement after recovering from near collapse.

An interim deal released today overcomes long-standing obstacles between industry and green groups, setting up for future conflict resolution, and backing strict timber certification system.

The two sides are yet to settle the major sticking point – how much native forest to log or protect – but say they are confident of final agreement.

An initial truce was agreed by industry leaders and environment groups in 2010 after 30 years of protests against native forest logging in Tasmania. It came as the industry collapsed in the face of market rejection of native forest woodchips, and the high dollar.

The talks won \$276 million support last year from the federal government to pay out forest workers, restructure the surviving industry and protect forests.

But in recent months as computer modelling of forest use scenarios failed to bring an acceptable outcome the talks threatened to unravel.

Before the latest round began last Friday, the chief executive of the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania, Terry Edwards, described them as “a last hurrah”.

The federal Environment Minister, Tony Burke, and the Tasmanian deputy premier, Bryan Green, joined the talks last weekend – and today Mr Edwards and other negotiators emerged with an interim agreement.

“It is our clear expectation to finalise an agreement in four to six weeks’ time,” Mr Edwards said. “At this stage we haven’t been able to finalise issues around wood supply and reserve outcomes.”

The conservation movement has been seeking protection of up to 568,000 hectares of native forests.

In the interim agreement, signatories accepted some continued native forest logging, with a transition to greater use of plantations, and legally binding protection of high-conservation-value native forests.

Today's document also spells out how a stakeholder council will oversee the “durability” of a final deal, and requires certification of timber production by the internationally accepted Forest Stewardship Council.

Environment Tasmania negotiator Phill Pullinger said negotiations had been very intense over the past week but all around the table were committed to achieving a solution.

“We absolutely want to deliver a strong and sustainable future for the forest industry in Tasmania that is free of the conflict and aggro that has gone on around this issue for so long,” Dr Pullinger said.

“We absolutely are working to deliver a strong outcome for nature conservation, so that it does deliver that durability that the industry and all of us have been working so hard to achieve.”



Questions

6(i) Explain which issues were causing a 'stalemate' and preventing the last minute Forest Peace deal in Tasmania.

6(ii) Do you think this public consultation approach to a resolution was the best way forward and why?

6(iii) Hold a class debate on production vs. conservation of native forests by taking sides of the forest industry or the conservationists.



ANSWERS

- 1.** Answers will vary among students depending on the issue selected. Some may discuss how recreational users like access to forests for bushwalking, hiking, mountain bike riding, bird watching or camping, whereas conservationists may prefer access is denied to prevent any disturbance to native animal habitats and vegetation. Others may discuss the benefits of forestry practice and value-adding to wood for creating jobs and regional growth, as opposed to conservationists that lobby against harvesting of native forests.
- 2.** Old growth forests are forests that are mature and have not been previously harvested, cleared or disturbed. Ecologically they consist of a canopy of over-storey trees, a well-developed understory of emerging trees and smaller species and shrubs, dead standing trees that have died of old age, and a forest floor with decaying and hollow logs, and a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna species as well as fungi and bacteria.
- 3.** The intense heat from bushfires can cause loss of life to humans, domestic animals and wildlife. It can destroy areas of forest trees and undergrowth, as well as homes, buildings and fences. Bushfires can also destroy timber bridges and power poles, cutting escape and access routes and essential services such as electricity.
- 4.** Sustainable Forest Management is regulated by policy and codes of practice. These codes make sure areas of forest that have endangered or rare species of flora and fauna are not disturbed so as to protect habitat from destruction. Codes or practice also dictate where access and logging roads can be located to minimise soil disturbance and any potential to erode and pollute waterways and destroy aquatic habitats. Further, codes define how many trees or volumes can be harvested so sustainable regrowth of trees can occur into the future.
- 5.** Old hollow trees provide habitat to a range of animal species such as cockatoo, owls, bats, pygmy possum, sugar glider, parrots, kingfishers, and numerous species of snakes, frogs and skinks.
- 6(i).** Issues difficult to resolve were the areas of native forest to log and preserve. The conservationists wanted legally binding contracts to protect areas of native forest with high conservation value from future harvest. They also wanted wood production certified under the 'Forest Stewardship Council'. The Forest Industry wanted to continue logging some areas of 'native forest' to provide wood supply and employment to local Tasmanians, rather than depend entirely on 'plantations' as being pushed by the conservationists.
- (ii)** Public consultation gives legitimacy to the negotiated political decisions and policy outcomes.