



Australia's forests: one person's perspective

The fourth Thanksgiving Prayer in our Holy Communion service reminds us that God has given us this Earth "to care for and delight in". The Communion service also reminds us that we must love our neighbours as ourselves. If we are to show love to our neighbours, we need to ensure that our use of God's creation, including forests, does not adversely affect our neighbours, including our fellow Australians, people in other lands and generations yet unborn.

We also need to show respect for all elements of creation simply because they were created by and belong to God. If we do not show respect for creation, we do not show respect for God.

The management of Australia's forests has been in the news recently, particularly during the Federal election, which prompts us to ask whether our present forest policies are consistent with our Christian responsibilities. This article looks at some of the issues from the perspective of a forester who is also a Christian.

Are Australia's forests disappearing?

Over 17% of Crown land forests are in reserves, and many other areas are informally reserved. In fact, less than 15% of Australia's native forests are managed for timber production.

Further, all logged areas are regenerated. Therefore, the total area of forest in Australia is not decreasing; in fact, it has increased in recent years due to the establishment of plantations. However, a young, regrowth forest is not the same as the forest it replaced, and it may be many years before a young forest has the complexity of an old forest.

Are Australia's forestry practices sustainable?

Forests provide many non-timber benefits such as soil and water protection, aesthetic values and habitat for wildlife. Forests are also places of beauty, wonder and majesty where we can find spiritual refreshment.

Australian forestry is subject to codes of practice which attempt to protect all these values.

Protection of endangered species is a particular focus,

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and there is no evidence that any species have become extinct as a result of forestry in Australia.

Forests are not static entities. Like all other living creatures they are born, grow, become old and die. Many eucalypt species require a major disturbance to regenerate. In nature, this is often provided by bushfires or cyclones. Modern forestry practices attempt to mimic nature by providing a suitable seed-bed for the forests to regenerate after timber harvesting.

Social considerations

As Christians, we must consider the well-being of other people. About 80,000 people are employed in Australia's forest and forest products industries. Many of these jobs are in rural areas where there is little alternative employment. The closure of the forest industry would cause immense economic and social hardship to the workers affected and to many rural communities.

It is sometimes claimed that tourism could provide an alternative to forestry. But are tourism and timber production mutually exclusive? One of Tasmania's most popular tourist attractions, the Tahune Forest Airwalk south of Hobart, is in a timber-producing forest. So perhaps we don't always have to make a choice between tourism and forestry – carefully managed forests can provide both.

Are plantations the answer?

Plantations can provide many of our timber needs. We could increase the area of plantations to reduce the need to produce timber from native forests. However, there is only limited cleared land available for plantation establishment. Further, plantations do not have the biodiversity of native forests. So, while plantations can provide our timber needs they

may not always provide all the other benefits that native forests provide.

International concerns

As trees grow, they take carbon out of the atmosphere. When timber is used for housing, furniture, and even paper, the carbon can be locked up for decades or centuries. The production of most alternatives to timber (e.g. plastic, steel, aluminium and concrete) requires large amounts of energy and therefore adds to carbon in the atmosphere.

If we reduce timber production in Australian forests, we will have to import more of our forest products. If these products are from forests which are not sustainably managed, then the environmental impact may be worse than if we continue to produce timber from Australia's forests.

Conclusion

Timber is renewable, biodegradable, requires little energy in its production and, when produced sustainably, is one of the most environmentally friendly products we have.

However, there must be a balance between the use and preservation of natural resources, bearing in mind the needs and the rights of people in other nations, of future generations, of people whose livelihood depends on forests, and of all elements of God's creation. Our decisions on natural resource use must also show respect for the world which God has entrusted to us.

Whether Australia's forest policies have found the right balance between use and preservation is a matter on which Christians should develop informed views. This article raises some of the complex issues we need to consider if we are to make an informed decision.

More information

The Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Association of Forest Industries can provide varying perspectives on the forest debate. Factual information is available from the National Forest Inventory and Australia's State of the Forests Report 2003 published by the Bureau of Rural Sciences (www.daff.gov.au/nfi and www.daff.gov.au/stateoftheforests).