

**Sustainable Communities and the Tasmanian Forest industry:
the lessons of history for planning the future.**

John Young

During our last election campaign, two parties did their best to avoid discussion of the problem which was on everybody's mind, the management of our native forests, and the election of four members of the Green party is a measure of their inability to suppress what Geoff Couser rightly called "The issue which dare not speak its name."

It's a problem that has embittered Tasmanian society for thirty years, and until we resolve it, we will continue to suffer from the divisiveness that cripples our efforts to solve our wider problems of under achievement in comparison with other states of the Commonwealth.¹ Unless we can understand the pattern of conflict which has beset us we won't be able to change it, so I want to talk about history, using the example of the Huon Valley, where I live, and then draw on the evidence and experience of the recent hearings of the Resource Planning and Development Commission about the Southwood Project, to suggest how the planning process might be used to break the cycle of conflict which keeps Tasmania from doing itself justice.

One of the best things about the Southwood hearings was that though strictly speaking, forest management was not on the agenda, the Commissioner understood its relevance in the mind of the community, and so we had eight days to learn what people really thought about it. Some representors accepted the heroic view expressed in the proponents' promotional literature, that "the forestry sector has supported Huon Valley residents for 180 years"², but the truth is that the social conditions in which the forest industry developed ensured that more often, it was the other way round, and that Huon Valley residents supported the forestry sector. It was an industry often in trouble, in which local people have been controlled, exploited, granted fleeting visions of security, and disappointed by forces beyond their control.

Our timber industry began as a by-product of the convict system, moving south from the "King's pits," near Hobart to north-west bay and Birch's bay in the 1820s and then to the Huon and Southport in the 1840s, using convict labour from the probation stations. Until 1851, about 75% of the Tasmanian population was of convict origin, which effectively disqualified them from obtaining land grants because of the levels of financial investment that were required by the Land Grants Act of 1825. Cutting timber was an occupation for which many emancipists were qualified

¹ Castles, Gerard, "The Choice", *Island*, No. 87, pp.108-113

² Southwood Resources-Huon, Wood Centre Report No. 9, September 2001

by experience, but as itinerant bush workers, sawyers or shipbuilders they were apt to harbour absconders and so, in 1828, timber cutting licences were introduced, not out of concern for the forests, but as a means of social control. Licences were issued, cancelled or withheld by the police department, and it was the larger landowners and ex-military officers who, as magistrates and constables, did the controlling.³ Paul Lennon's recent description of Timber Workers for Forests as "all the usual suspects" has a certain historical resonance about it.

The Victorian gold rush established a mainland market for the export of Tasmanian timber which created new opportunities, but it also began the youthful exodus which has been a Tasmanian problem ever since. The Government reaction was to pass the most coercive Masters and Servants Act in the Australian colonies to stop the working class as a whole packing their bags and leaving their masters to their own devices. For the rest of the nineteenth century the timber industry grew more slowly, but steadily, not through major industrial development, but because of the contribution it made to an increasingly diverse and value adding local economy. It provided local people with increasing scope to contribute to the economic development, which lay the foundation of a civic society.

Timber cleared to make room for crops didn't leave the Huon Valley until it was transformed into sawn timber, split shingles, palings, apple cases, barrels, or increasingly, ships and boats. From 1841 until well into the twentieth century shipbuilding was a major regional industry. It provided a fleet of 71 ketches for the coastal trade of South Australia between 1841 and 1970, for example, and other vessels were exported to Victoria, New South Wales and New Zealand. Punts, skiffs and passage boats, then wooden steamboats did the hauling, socialising and commuting jobs now done for a population not much larger than it was in 1900, by thousands of cars and trucks. Wooden boats made only good noises, used only renewable resources, kept people fit. They complemented the scenery. And they provided full employment.⁴

Little thought was given to the forests themselves until 1885 when a Conservator of Forests was appointed within the Lands Department, and the post was filled from 1886 to 1892, but then it was allowed to lapse for 27 years.⁵

This proved a window of opportunity for control of the resource to fall into the hands of big business, supported by the Tasmanian government. The principle

³ Dargavel, J.B., "The Development of the Tasmanian Wood Industries: A Radical Analysis", PhD thesis, Canberra, 1983, pp.54-58.

⁴ Young, J.M., "Back to the Future: Choosing a meaning from Regional History", *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol.5, No.1, 1995-6, pp.119-120

⁵ Row, Margaret, "The Tasmanian Timber Trade 1830-1930: A Case Study in Spatial Interaction", BSc Honours Thesis, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1977, p.37

that control of resources should be granted in proportion to the amount of money a settler was prepared to invest, which had been the basis of the Land Grants Act of 1825, was used in 1898 to amend the Crown Land Act to provide investors with 21 year leases of timbered land, on condition that a sawmill of specific horse-power, depending on the size of the lease, was installed in the next twelve months.⁶ Just as the 1825 Act had excluded emancipists from land ownership, local sawmillers and small companies were effectively excluded by the 1898 amendment, from having a say in forest management.

Robert Affleck Robertson, a Hobart timber merchant, was one of the first to show an interest in the new opportunities. He is still remembered in Geeveston as “Flat Earth Robertson” because of his scientific beliefs, but he was a man of great vision and energy, who soon achieved “world’s best practice” in booster politics and public relations.⁷

Geeveston was chosen as Robertson’s base of operations because it was close to the forest and to deep water at Hospital Bay. At this point, in 1900, John and Osborne Geeves owned the biggest local sawmill and employed 26 people, so Robertson gained their support and soon included their lease of 1,659 hectares, and their mill in his company’s assets. Then, off to Glasgow, where he found a group which he described as “respectable, prominent and conservative men of business”. He persuaded them to invest £100,000 in his scheme, which became the Huon Timber Company.⁸

Then, while Robertson toured North America to check out the latest timber machinery and technology, his Hobart lawyer petitioned Parliament for a further 21-year lease of his 8,903 hectare concession in the Arve and Kermantie valleys. In return he promised to provide a Hydro scheme on the Kermantie River, supplemented in summer time with water supplied by canals from lakes Esperance, Osborne and Perry in the Hartz mountains. This would power sawmills and an electric railway from the forest, through Geeveston and on to Huonville, picking up apples and passengers along the way. It would be cheap enough to compete with the river traffic. He also promised two wharves at Hospital Bay to ship timber and apples direct to London, and a 100 horse power saw mill at Whale Point to cut 200,000 super feet of timber a week.⁹

⁶ Row, Margaret, “The Huon Timber Company and the Crown: A Tale of Resource Development”, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, Vol.27, No.3, September 1983, p.87 and Note 3, p.101.

⁷ Ibid, p.89, p.91.

⁸ Row, Margaret, 1983, p.89

⁹ Ibid

As it turned out, the hydro scheme, electric railway and apple wharf didn't come off, but he still got the lease, and his mates in Glasgow invested their money. He spent it on a shipload of machinery and a wharf at Whale point, where it was set up in 1902.

Opposition came from small sawmillers, who saw no need for large scale investment at a time of full employment, and objected to big business "taking over all the country", when their own requests for special reserves had always been refused.¹⁰ The Huon Timber Company did contribute to an already prosperous regional economy. The Geeves family's 'Speedwell' sawmill had a steam generator put in and started working two shifts a day as the mill "glowed with unaccustomed brilliance for Friday night shoppers".¹¹ At Whale Point a vast bandsaw was built, 24 feet high with a blade 15 inches wide and 60 feet long, whizzing around two 8-foot diameter wheels. It cut through a 12-foot log, 5 feet in diameter in 19 seconds.¹² Forty miles of 3' gauge railway went into the forest to extract only the best logs, using cable logging between standing trees to get them to the railhead. At its peak, the company employed 170 people, and it built 20 houses for people who came from outside the district.¹³

But it performed poorly financially and in 1908 Henry Jones & Co. replaced Robertson as Company manager. They were no more successful, and in 1911 the company was sold for about 1/3 of its original cost to an English syndicate, which sold in turn to an early multinational company with establishments in France, England, W.A., N.S.W., and the Philippines. The Huon Timber Company kept its name, but after the World War, it began to sell its assets and downsize its staff. It never made a profit after 1920, never paid a dividend, and was wound up in 1929 with an accumulated loss of a quarter of a million pounds.¹⁴

The Kermantie football team were premiers at the time, but they all left town to look for other jobs. The junior team stepped into the breach, but didn't win a game all year. The Company had brought an increased but fragile prosperity to the Huon Valley, and it left behind a vision of vanished magnificence and a generation of workers who cherished its memory. They were entitled to feel deprived of a security they had come to take for granted. The small sawmillers went back into the depleted forest the company left behind, with their bullocks and wooden railways, and even pit saws and broad axes, until the 1940s, having beaten the over-capitalised competition in the

¹⁰ Dargavel, J. B. op.cit., p.125

¹¹ Row, M. 1983, p.93

¹² Row, M. 1977, note 31, p.102

¹³ Row, M. 1983, p.96

¹⁴ Row, M. 1983, p.96

struggle for survival. But unlike the Huon Timber Company's machinery, which was shipped off to the Philippines, the legislation which had set the pattern of government preference for capital-intensive industry development stayed in place.

Forest management, as opposed to semi-regulated exploitation, began in 1920, when a Forestry Act created jobs for a Conservator and a small staff. They found life difficult. Looking back in 1937, the Conservator said, "The regime of laissez-faire had become so firmly established that any mention of control or restriction was regarded as heresy of the most dangerous order."¹⁵ Credibility suffered in 1941 when it was alleged that D'Alton, the Minister for Forests had accepted bribes from a mainland timber company in return for a favourable deal to establish a sawmill and ply-mill at Loongana, in the Northwest. A Royal Commission proved that he had been bribed, but when D'Alton returned from New Zealand, where he'd been resting, he was re-elected to the Legislative Council, where he served as Government Leader for the next 20 years.¹⁶ As the late Mr Rouse said, "It's not un-Tasmanian because it's been done before".

The D'Alton scandal was followed by the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1947, which marked the beginning of the management envisaged since 1920, but the emphasis was still on attracting large investment and high volume extraction. In 1954 a Bill was passed to allow the Commission to sell the rights to 105,000 hectares of southern forest, but it took a long time to do it. Two rayon companies and two pulp companies took years to investigate the timber before the concession was finally granted to Australian Paper Manufacturers Ltd, or A.P.M. Small sawmillers were shut out of the planning process.¹⁷

The advantage of a pulp market from a big industry point of view was that the need for high volume justified a change from selective logging to clear-felling, which was the quickest way to harvest timber from mixed wet forests, and then regenerate Eucalypts alone, which was what the pulp companies wanted. A pulp mill was built at Port Huon in 1962 and the conversion of wet mixed forests in the south, into eucalypt re-growth picked up speed. The consequence, for the local community was a decline in the number of small sawmillers, especially those who specialised in rain forest timber species used for high skill, high value adding industries like building boats or furniture. Rain forest species can re-generate after clear-felling, but it takes from 250 years in the case of Leatherwood or Myrtle, to 400 years in the case of Celery-Top Pine for them to achieve their best value as timber¹⁸. The new regime of

¹⁵ Dargavel, J.B., op cit, p.177

¹⁶ Ibid, p.180

¹⁷ Ibid, p.209

¹⁸ Horne, R. and Hickey, J. "Review: Ecological Sensitivity of Australian Rainforests to selective Logging", *Australian Journal of Ecology*, (16), 1991, p 122.

80 -year rotations does not allow that to happen.

Many small sawmillers became contractors to the pulp mill. This meant that though they kept many of their skills, a detailed knowledge within the community of the relationships between whole ecosystems, the timbers they could produce, and their best uses was lost in one generation.

The Forestry Commission built the forest roads and regenerated the forest after it was logged, which was soon costing Tasmanian tax-payers \$10 million a year¹⁹, but unlike other timber producing countries, where pulp companies do their own harvesting, the financial risk of buying expensive equipment, usually on credit, was passed to the local community. In return A. P. M.'s commitment to its contractors was usually a verbal agreement.

At its peak the mill employed 170 people, but the first retrenchments came in 1968, and there was a temporary shut down in 1975. In 1978, workers voted to work shorter hours to avoid retrenchments, but in August 1982 the mill closed for 6 weeks, and it closed again on Christmas Eve with a verbal promise that it would open again in 1984. It re-opened briefly from 1986 to 1991, and then closed for good.²⁰

A pattern of raised hopes, anxiety and social tragedy was now clear. Denbeigh Armstrong analysed the impact of experience in her thesis about Geeveston and Cygnet ten years later, using personal interviews as part of her research. One person told her that:

“Geeveston has had a lot of promises made to it and not too many of them have been fulfilled. Everyone hung their hat on A. P. M. re-opening for years, and that was never going to happen. There has been a combination of loss after loss after loss, creating an entrenched feeling of being losers, entrenched negativity.”²¹

Entrenched negativity is a dangerous state of mind in which simple explanations and single solutions can become attractive. The transition from the economic diversity, full employment and relative prosperity in 1901, to the demonstrable vulnerability of 1991 might be expected to lead to the conclusion that large natural resource companies were not a reliable basis for sustainable communities. But the historical context was one in which the present polarisation of Tasmanian society on the basis of philosophical difference had its origin. Two months after the pulp mill closed in 1982, twenty thousand people joined a rally in Hobart to save the

¹⁹ Taylor, A.J. “Plant Closure: the Economic, Social and Environmental Consequences of a Closure of a Pulp Mill”, BA (Hons) Thesis, University of Tasmania, 1983, p. 40

²⁰ *Huon News*, 6/6/91, “APM’s Port Huon Mill to Close”.

²¹ Armstrong, D., “Narratives of Community and Sustainability: the Case of Cygnet and Geeveston in Tasmania’s Huon Valley”, BA (Hons) Thesis, University of Tasmania, 2000, pp.88-89.

Franklin River and a blockade was established on the dam site. In July the High Court of Australia ruled that the River should not be dammed, and with the election of Bob Brown to Parliament, The Greens became a force in Tasmanian politics, and the focus of difference between Greens and Laborials changed from dams to forests.

A decisive factor for the Huon was the experience of the contractors who went in hope after the mill closed, to work on the Franklin dam, only to lose their jobs yet again two months later. Much of the rage that might well have been directed at A.P.M. was deflected onto green opponents closer to home.

A.P.M. had, in spite of its difficulties, become a focus of pride and loyalty, a Huon Timber Company writ large, but with a modern industrial policy. I met a man last week who told me it was the first place he had ever worked “where you could wash your hands when you’d been to the toilet”.

The Company had also prepared a good exit strategy. They were not legally obliged to give separation payments to those who lost their jobs, but they did, so no one was immediately short of money. Closing on Christmas Eve meant that there wasn’t long to wait til the apple season began, when casual work would be available. South Australia’s devastating bush fires in February 1983 were good luck for Huon contractors, who went to Mt. Gambier to salvage timber instead of having their machinery re-possessed.²²

These factors de-fused the antagonism which might have been expected to be felt in the Company’s direction, and when it finally closed, in 1991, it was generally believed that it was the doing of the Greens and their friends in Canberra, though in fact the reasons were entirely commercial and technological.²³

The Greens had other things to worry about. In 1985 Australian Newsprint Mills announced plans to build a woodchip mill at Whale Point, under the banner of Huon Forest Products, and in December 1987, Robin Gray approved its construction. The Huon Protection Society, formed with the support of the Wilderness Society, established a base on the Huon River opposite Whale Point, and planned a campaign to prevent it. Strategy included a protest ‘vigil’ at the site itself, lobbying the Hawke Government, which controlled woodchip licences, and a local strategy of public meetings, a phone poll, newspaper advertisements and joining the local branch of the Labour Party. The most successful meetings were at Cygnet, where Labour M.P. Fran Bladel, joined Peg Putt on the platform, and Ranelagh, where Bob Brown and Peg Putt were joined by sawmiller Daryl Brown, and craftworker Tony DeLara.²⁴

²² Taylor, A.J., op. cit., p.76

²³ *Huon News*, 6 June 1991

²⁴ *Ibid*, 10 November 1988

Tony DeLara put the case for a value based timber industry under local control rather than a volume based one, which destroyed ecological complexity and was out of control. This “specialised industry”, he said, employed 1000 workers, used 25,000 cubic metres a year to produce goods worth \$100 million, while the woodchip industry employed 350 people, used two and a half million cubic metres a year, and still earned only 150 million. The chip mill was the sign of an industry going too fast too far, and being too greedy.²⁵ Division increased as industry loyalists and Greens learnt strategies from each other. Robin Gray, Ray Groom and Esperance Warden Jack Kile hit back in August 1988 with a Geeveston meeting in which support of the chip mill was unanimous, “except,” as the Huon news reported, “for one disgruntled small sawmiller, who launched a personal attack on the Premier, and several A.P.M. employees, who voiced concern.”²⁶

At Port Huon, the Huon Protection Society struck trouble, and the local paper was told that, “The meeting at Port Huon backfired on their system because the local people in that area are hard working people and will fight any ‘enemy’ which intrudes on their ‘patch’”²⁷. When in May 1989 the Labour/Green Accord was signed, with the condition that the woodchip mill would be stopped, the Esperance Progress Association was outraged and published a half page advertisement in the *Huon News* condemning “the recent alliance between the A.L.P. and the Green independents because it attacks the heart of our principles of industry employment and progress”. Special venom was reserved for “the three B’s, Brown, Bates and Bladel” who were responsible.²⁸

Some still hoped to find common ground. Athol Meyer, Liberal Legislative Councillor for the Huon, persuaded Paul Lennon to join him in supporting a ‘Woodskills Centre’, promised by the Helsham Commission, but never taken seriously. Meyer said it would be based on a conjunction of special timbers and local skills. “Teachers, parents, those with jobs and those looking for work, forestry giants and small millers, craft workers, greenies and anti greenies, this is one idea that everyone should support”.²⁹

But at this point in history, a new strategy emerged which promised to big business the glittering prize of not having to compromise with anyone, and removed the need for constructive debate. This was the ‘Wise Use’ strategy, from the United

²⁵ *Huon News*, 10 November 1988

²⁶ *Ibid*, 18 August 1988.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 17 November 1988

²⁸ *Ibid*, 15 June 1989

²⁹ *Ibid*, 13 Oct 1988

States, founded in 1988 by Ron Arnold and Alan Gottlieb. It started out as the ‘pro-industry group’ but that rang no bells for anyone. ‘Wise Use’ stole ideas from the Greens and turned them against their originators.

Arnold explained that the public is apt to mistrust the motives of big business and advised it to organise local grass-roots organisations:

“A local citizen’s group can do things industry can’t. It can speak as a group of people who live close to nature and have more natural wisdom than city people. It can provide allies with something to join, some place to nurture that vital sense of belonging and common sense. It can develop emotional commitment among your allies, it can build coalitions to build real political clout. It can evoke powerful archetypes like the sanctity of the family, the virtue of the close knit community”.³⁰

Tasmania’s history since convict times had prepared a fertile seedbed in which this strategy could germinate quickly. The Franklin Dam and the Huon woodchip mill had been recently defeated by an invasion of new ideas and new people. Many of them were articulate and politically sophisticated. This frightened people, and, as William Street, another Wise Use exponent explains:

“Once you have folks that are scared, then you have folks that are receptive to any kind of solution. At that point, the Wise Use groups speak to the [timber workers’] fears better than most of the locally based, and certainly better than the nationally based environmental groups.”³¹

Some Australian corporations seem to have adopted this strategy, which has the effect of dividing communities and creating animosity in the very places where honest communication and the building of civic society are most needed. The quaintly named Forest Protection Society, founded in 1987, was already the very model of a grass roots industry front group, with 80% of its funding coming from industry and the rest from membership and public fund-raising.³² It’s now called Timber Communities Australia and has branches in all states. In the Huon, the Esperance Progress Association and the Huon Timber Association were already there as the basis on which to build a forceful political movement.

The opportunity came in February 1995, when Ray Groom told the media that, “after considerable effort, since the loss of Huon Forest Products during the term of the previous Government”, his government had gained the interest of Fibreform Wood Products Inc. of California in establishing a sawmill and wood panel plant at

³⁰ Echeveria, J. & Eby, R.B., *Let the People Judge: Wise use and the Property Rights Movement*, Island Press, Washington D.C., 1995, cit. p.4

³¹ Bader, Sharon, *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*, Revised Edition, Scribe publications, Melbourne, 2000, p.54

³² *Ibid*, p.31

Whale Point, to employ 200 people.³³

This time opposition was pre-empted by what the *Huon News* described as “The biggest gathering ever to attend a public forum within the Huon Valley” at the Huon Sports centre.³⁴

600 people came to hear speeches by Evan Rolley and heads of government departments, which presented the issue as a competition between Port Huon and either Margate or Bridgewater, in which local support was a vital factor. The Greens stood no chance of effective engagement this time because their pre-occupation was the draining of Lake Pedder, which prompted Greg Norris to place a tongue in cheek full page ad in the local paper, soliciting membership of a ‘Save Lake Pedder’ organisation, on the grounds that draining the enlarged lake would kill 2000 platypuses, and was, “the greatest single threat the species had ever faced... Mounting scientific evidence can no longer be ignored... Let the greens know we care about our wildlife... donations to our fighting fund would be appreciated.”³⁵

Such opposition as there was to Fibreform came from the Southern Forests Community Group, an alliance of woodworkers, bee-keepers and small sawmillers who feared that a large industrial activity using a large supply of eucalypt pulpwood would ensure the destruction of the remaining mixed forests in the south, which were the resource base for local industries. Rex Direen, the spokesman who belongs to a sixth generation Huon family, called for good planning and the recognition of the validity of competing interests:

“As far as we are concerned, Fibreform are welcome to share the resources of the southern forests, but at the same time, as a community, we owe it to future generations not to be greedy.”³⁶

A month later, the front page of the *Huon News* carried the headline, "Fibreform pulls out". Evan Rolley and Chris Brooks of T.D.R. did their best to save the day by a last ditch flight to Los Angeles, but to no avail, and the politicians were left to pick up the pieces. A courageous Ray Groom told a meeting of disappointed people in Huonville:

“There has been a lot of disappointment in this area...look back at Huon Forest Products, A.P.M. and what happened. The whole history of this type of downstream processing in the Huon region has not been a good one, and this

³³ *Huon Valley News*, 2 March 1995

³⁴ *Ibid*, 6 March 1995

³⁵ *Ibid*, 23 March 1995

³⁶ *Huon Valley News*, 25 May 1995

is another blow for the area.”³⁷

Many proposals were made at the time, for different strategies to be used, by Kevin Perkins, Marcus Tatton, Athol Meyer, Rex Direen and his research group. Tim Tierney, Kevin Perkins and I put in a joint one but no-one in either Forestry Tasmania or Forests and Forest Industries Council responded, probably because we pointed out that the sustainability of a wood skills centre, which used special timbers, could only be achieved if the forests they came from were managed to produce a supply which could last indefinitely.³⁸

Instead the Premier promised that the century old search for a large scale downstream processing plant would continue, because “there has been a lot of disappointment, people’s hopes have been raised so much”.³⁹

Then came Southwood. I consciously suspended judgement on it until the Development Plan and Environmental Management Plan were submitted.

When pro and anti Southwood organizations were formed, I thought a good way to do two things, raise funds to restore the Palais Theatre in Franklin and encourage productive community interaction, would be to charge a low admission fee to a public debate in the Theatre, with strict rules, three speakers on each side, a rigorous chairman and Tim Tierney as time-keeper. I knew that both sides would try to stack the meeting, so we’d get a full house, but whoever won, it would be an exercise in civic development and understanding, with tea to follow, on a Sunday afternoon. We wanted to create a safe space.

Only one side agreed to the idea. The leader of the other side told me his members had discussed my invitation but were not interested in debate at all. Their sole purpose was to defeat their opposition because they could not imagine why anyone could have a position other than their own.⁴⁰

The social divide that this situation demonstrated meant that a requirement of the Land Use and Planning Approvals Act, that public participation in planning should be encouraged became an impossible target. What occurred instead was public *reaction* and increasingly expensive attempts to disarm that reaction.

This was where the art of *spin* came in. It was politically important to discuss the management of old growth forests, but strategically important to argue that the planning process had nothing to do with them, so the statement that no wood from

³⁷ Ibid, 3 August 1995

³⁸ Young, J and Tierney, T. “Woodskills Training Centre Proposal”, Huon Valley Chamber of Commerce, Huonville, September 1992

³⁹ *Huon Valley News*, 8 April 1995

⁴⁰ J. Young to A. Duggan, pers. com. June 2001

old growth forests would go to Southwood was never actually made, but it was vigorously implied by the mantra that Southwood was “*all* about” adding value to re-growth, and it was asserted visually by a poster displayed in the council room where people went to look at the documents they needed to see to make a representation. It showed two seemingly identical maps of old growth forest in the Huon Valley dated 2001 and 2009⁴¹ despite that old growth in the southern forests is still being clear felled at a rate of between 200-400ha per year⁴².

I read all the representations presented to the RPDC a week ago and they are a revealing reflection of the impact these strategies had on local communities. It is a pity that most Councillors were shielded from their impact, because they read only the summary of them provided by Council staff. 66 representations favoured the project, 50 of them solely on grounds of expected employment, with 150 opposed for a variety of detailed scientific, social, ethical, economic and planning reasons. They had wised up to “wise use”.

Successful *consultation* demands honesty. But the proponent was said to have “failed in its duty to consult with the community in a manner which allows for genuine input into resource management and planning”⁴³. Another person said, “Consultation has, to date, smacked of corporate bullying, subtle manipulative or dismissive tactics...rather than genuine consultation” and complained of taxpayer funded media advertising using the front group Huon Citizens for Southwood.⁴⁴ Another gave five examples to show that literature presented as factual information, was purely an advertising exercise with inaccuracies, distortion of facts and omissions⁴⁵. “Comments by the Deputy-Premier,” another said “and the unprecedented jingoistic advertisements run by forest related organisations” mean that, “independent decision-making by the RPDC is going to be very difficult.”⁴⁶

It was now the opponents of the scheme rather than the industry groups who felt threatened. One of them said, “They know they are standing up against the power and money of big corporations and the money they can spend on propaganda. This could be a more pleasant community. It is divided by fear, and a fearful society

⁴¹ Southwood Resources- Huon, “The Wood centre: Adding Value to re-growth Wood”, Poster, January 2002

⁴² Forestry Tasmania staff, Warra field trip, 18/11/01

⁴³ Huon Valley Council, File 10009, Volume 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Vol.6

⁴⁵ Ibid, Vol.7

⁴⁶ Ibid.

is not sustainable”.⁴⁷ A woman from Ranelagh said, “It grieves me greatly to see the division and impact that forest management practices have on people and small business in the Huon Valley.” She deplored what seemed to be the never ending necessity to form committees to defend her property values, safety, environment and her way of life.⁴⁸

The 66 supporting representations were mostly short statements of personal approval. Some were basic thank-you letters or expressions of loyalty: “We in the valley are deeply indebted to Forestry Tasmania for the likes of the Airwalk, the many new plantations, and Geeveston in particular for the work carried out in and around the town. Thanks again for the initiative shown by Forestry Tasmania”.⁴⁹

Part of the reason why those supporting the project rarely addressed planning issues was probably a letter sent to members of Huon Citizens for Southwood by President, Alan Duggan, which told them that a short letter was all that was required. They placed confidence in a petition which collected 1613 signatures over a two-month period, but the major representation was made by the leaders on behalf of the 258 paid up members, whose names and addresses were included in support of the representation.⁵⁰ Most members lived in the Huon Valley, but exceptions included leading politicians of the Liberal and Labour parties, and senior staff of the Southwood project and Forestry Tasmania, whose address was given as “Melville Street, Hobart”⁵¹.

The actual hearings were held by the RPDC in the Huonville Council buildings from 1st to the 14th of May this year, and I was there for a lot of the time. An initial attempt was made to shorten proceedings by making us form groups concerned with particular issues, and to nominate spokes people, but everyone insisted on their right to be heard individually. The result was a totally absorbing experience. Representors’ styles varied from highly professional power point presentations to concise personal statements. There were lengthy cross examinations, which teased out the meaning of “getting out of old growth and into re-growth”, “all about re-growth”, “World’s best practice” and other spin words, and enabled us to find out the true nature of the project and its likely impact on the Valley and its communities.

The best parts for me were the inspired performances by the people of

⁴⁷ Huon Valley Council, File No. 10009, Vol.7

⁴⁸ Ibid, Vol.2.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Vol.8

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

Ranelagh, whose victory has given us all renewed confidence in our institutions, and the bee-keepers, who swarmed into the chamber, smiling with righteous confidence, and told their story, which cuts through reductionist industrial thinking and explained the relationships, both ecological and economic, which underpin both healthy environments and sustainable communities.

The hearings achieved what we had hoped to achieve the previous year by holding a debate at the Palais Theatre. They created a safe space where people of all persuasions could speak the truth as they saw it. But it was provided at the end of the process instead of the beginning, and so the planning process has not been able to use the variety of perspectives and the wealth of knowledge, talent and experience which is part of the social capital within the community.

The old way of boosting the economy of Tasmania is the tried and failed recipe of the last hundred years. The strategy of doing favours, granting exemptions, abandoning controls, in order to attract big business to develop our natural resources. After a century of disappointment we should be able to tell whether it's working or not.

A better way would be to start the planning process bottom up instead of top down by first, finding out what people want, next, seeking investors who are best able to help them achieve it and then, establishing what competing interests need to be reconciled in order to make developments ecologically sustainable, socially valuable and economically viable. Only those corporations prepared to accept such principles, and conform to the same laws as the rest of us should be given access to natural resources. This strategy will save the corporations the millions they now spend on public relations, and communities can be spared the remorseless work that *must* be done to avoid the grief of seeing their economies decline and their social fabric crumble as the quality of their natural resources is depleted before their eyes. Communities could turn their energies then to making Tasmania the model for the world to follow, which it ought to be.