

THE “FIGHT FOR THE FORESTS” AFFAIR

Richard Routley and Val Plumwood

Title and Contents

The book *The Fight for the Forests* (first edition 1973, 290 pages) looked at the situation of Australian forests, especially proposed and progressing industrial development of the forests such as in pine and woodchip schemes; it discussed economic, ecological and social aspects of these schemes and of the planning which underlay and justified them, as well as associated issues in the foundations of economics and environmental decision-making.

Authors

The book's authors were Richard Routley and Val Routley (now Plumwood). Richard Routley has been since 1971 Senior Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH), Australian National University; the position is tenured with a five-year bar, at that time passed more or less automatically. Val Plumwood is the author of a number of published papers on philosophy and environmental subjects.

Qualifications to Write the Book

These were of a reasonable generalist kind. As philosophers we were well acquainted with the theory of scientific methodology, probability and decision theory; as environmentalists and keen amateur naturalists we had a reasonable general knowledge of the biological and ecological aspects involved. The foundations of economics is also an area of academic research and interest. The local forestry literature is neither very copious nor very specialised, so that it is fairly easy to become more or less completely acquainted with it. Most of it is fairly easily understood by people without professional forestry training. *The Fight for the Forests* laid major emphasis on reasoning, on methodological considerations in planning and prediction, and on bringing out underlying or hidden assumptions — especially value assumptions — in these areas. This is an area in which we were well qualified to write. Given the very large range of areas involved in discussing forestry as a social phenomenon, ranging from scientific methodology and decision theory through sociology, social science, economics and many areas of biology and ecology, our own special areas of academic interest and in-depth knowledge were at least as generally relevant to the issues concerned as most of those involved in a conventional forestry training. Care was taken to provide full references to background work in cases where specialist areas of knowledge were involved, so that no

one had to rely simply on our authority for claims made. The book attempted then to present an integrated picture of the forestry situation in Australia on the basis of detailed knowledge of some areas relevant to the field, as the work of foresters themselves often does", and much of it consisted of what is now known as "applied philosophy".

Character of Book

The Fight for the Forests was not a very radical book politically but apparently offended mainly because it attacked cherished programs and because of its strong emphasis on the control of forests by the large forest industries, the close connections of these industries with state forest services, who were allegedly employed in the public interest, and the role of professional foresters in promoting ecologically destructive forestry developments which were in the interests of industry. At that time the forestry profession was a sacred cow, virtually beyond criticism, and the book, rather predictably, was the object of intense hostility from professional foresters (including academic foresters). Its main specific contentions, concerning the excessive nature of the pine program and overestimation in planning for this program, the destructive environmental effects and, for the public, the uneconomic nature of pine and woodchip schemes in public forests, were at the time controversial but have been subsequently vindicated by events and by a number of later studies by others. The book tended to receive unfavourable reviews from foresters, but received many favourable, often highly favourable, reviews from non-foresters.

What Happened

Funds for printing the book were obtained, more or less by chance, from the RSSS, which at that time had a substantial end-of-triennium surplus, without going through any refereeing system. After final typing for photo-offset printing was completed, and just a few weeks before the book was due to go to the printer, professional foresters and sympathisers within the Australian National University appear to have got wind of its likely contents. (An article on pines published the previous year, in *Australian Quarterly* 1972, had a substantial impact** and provided a good idea of the book's general stance.) The then *Vice-Chancellor*, Professor R. M. Williams, suggested *that printing should not proceed unless the book was given to the head of the Forestry School at the ANU, to be revised in accordance with his comments.* (Given the attitudes, beliefs, and connections of professionals in general and this Head of Department in particular, this would almost certainly have crippled or destroyed the book.) Fortunately, the Acting-Director of RSSS at the time was Professor G. Sawer, who resisted this suggestion, and was also kind enough to read through the manuscript to check on liability to legal action. (In the fuss preceding publication it had been suggested also that publication should not proceed because of possible liability to such legal action). He suggested a few minor changes of a few lines at one or two points to safeguard against this.

* These points should help to dispel the professionalist myth, propagated commonly by foresters, that only people with professional forestry training are qualified to write about the forests. Often such foresters also advocate a closed decision-making system in which they, as the "relevant professionals", have sole rights of decision. However, forestry issues raise many questions of social values which are of general concern and should be widely discussed. As well, as noted, a very wide range of discipline areas are involved, and some of the most important for the fate of the forests lie right outside conventional forestry training. For example, the major and most influential papers underlying the original planning for the pine program in the late 1960s (papers which were heavily criticised in our work) were the product of a botanist, Dr M. R. Jacobs, although they were primarily concerned with questions of planning and decision. But when considering these questions (e.g. the popular planning methodology of overestimating future demand and population to "play safe"), it is more helpful to understand, say, methodology and decision theory than it is to understand, say, the patterns of seeding of various eucalypts. No one complained about Dr Jacobs going outside his "area of competence", nor was his work suppressed or subjected to censorship on this ground, because he was covered by the professional umbrella. There are many similar cases, which reveal the arbitrariness with which field restrictions are commonly applied to restrict inquiry.

** After the article appeared there was, for the first time, parliamentary questioning of the pine program, with some strong speeches against it, and an increasingly critical attitude was taken in the press.

Publication proceeded. The first edition of the book in 1973 sold out within a few months, and two further editions, revised and updated (1974, 1975), also sold out shortly after printing, making it one of the best selling books ever distributed by ANU Press.

But harassment from irate professionals and their sympathisers within the University was not over. We were left in no doubt that the book had been “an embarrassment to the University”. In 1974 the author with library rights was prevented on order from the Acting Head of the Forestry School, Professor Carron, from using the Forestry School Library. As the library contains most forestry publications and material, the order constituted a direct attempt to block further work. The ban was later overturned as a result of intervention from the Biological Sciences Library Committee.

Later, RSSS, apparently in response to criticism of certain school publications, set up a committee to review publications procedure. Shortly afterwards we were informed that no funding would be available for a further edition of the book or for a reprint of the book. No reasons were given. We were not informed that the book was the subject of a review (as there were at that time no proposals by us for a further edition). We were given no opportunity to nominate referees, to supply relevant information, or to influence the outcome of the review in any way. Subsequently the school adopted a different procedural system in which the departments and authors concerned nominate suitable referees. There is little doubt that, had we been given the opportunity to follow the regular system, suitable referees could have been found to provide favourable reports. Meanwhile, orders for the now out-of-print book continue to arrive, and it continues to be favourably reviewed and mentioned, both in Australia and overseas. There is little doubt that a further edition or reprint could have been sold.

General Comments

The situation in the forestry profession showed, at least at the time we were working in the area, a very high degree of suppression and professional cohesiveness, and an exceptional degree of conformity and absence of critical voices. This probably is so pronounced because of the great control and influence exerted by a highly restricted body of employers, namely, a few large forest industries and the state forest services. For the same reasons, perhaps, there was a high degree of secrecy and control of information.

We encountered many severe cases of suppression in the forestry profession (applying in academic, research, bureaucratic and state forest service areas) and in related biological areas. This included action by state forest services to terminate the research projects (in state forests) of those who made public statements unfavourable to them, or who supplied information or were associated with those who did, and many other adverse effects on the careers or prospects of potentially critical professionals. The influence of state forest services extended to within the ANU. Suppression was so regular and pronounced that we believe it is probably true that no one inside the profession or discipline could have, at that time, written a book similar to *The Fight for the Forests*. Such criticism could only appear where it slipped past the usual professional control and suppression mechanisms, as our book did.

The general suppression mechanism illustrated by this case, then, appears to be: a combination of indoctrination and intimidation, plus well-developed professional loyalty, ensures that significant criticism does not originate from *inside* the profession or discipline itself, or does so only in a rare, muted and easily overlooked form; at the same time the professionalism mystique and the discipline system is invoked, as it was in our case, to ensure that no one *outside* the profession can make such criticism *in a way which needs to be treated seriously* (for example through publication in a university series), and even to ensure that such criticism by potentially dangerous outsiders is silenced altogether. The fragmentation of knowledge, like the fragmentation of work, is thus used as a method of control. It's a neat system, which nicely protects a particular set of doctrines and interests.

Postscript by Brian Martin

On 26 July 1983 I sent a copy of this chapter to the Australian National University inviting a response from someone representing the University, or anyone else appropriate, to be included in this book. On 15 August the Secretary of the ANU replied saying that the University itself did not wish to comment, but that a copy of the chapter had been sent to Professor Griffin, Head of the Department of Forestry, who had given a copy to Dr Carron, and that it was likely that Dr Carron would respond. On 9 September I wrote to Dr Carron inviting a response to be included in this book. As of February 1985 I had received no reply.