



Private landowners and their forests: Recreational and aesthetic uses come out tops!

INTRODUCTION

Over 2001 and 2002, the School of Resources, Environment and Society at the Australian National University carried out research into the uses and values that private landowners in the Bega Valley and Bombala Shire zones have for native forest on their properties. This research was sponsored by South-East NSW Private Forestry (a local extension organisation supporting the management of private forests) and was aimed at obtaining some idea of just what landowners were doing, and planning to do, with their native forest. The results from this research are summarised here, as drawn from a report given to the sponsors. Further details are given at the end of this summary if more information is desired.

The research was broken into a number of parts, which included questions on: (a) use of forest, both in the immediate past and plans for the next 10 years; (b) forest values, dealing with ecological sensitivity, stewardship and environmental values; and (c) socio-demographic information.

PAST AND FUTURE USES OF NATIVE FOREST

By far, recreational and aesthetic uses were consistently the most common and important. Questions were posed about 20 different uses that landowners could have undertaken in the previous year and 24 different intentions that landowners might have for their native forest over the next 10 years. Of the 76% of respondents who indicated that they used their native forest in the previous year, it was found that 89% sought solitude or privacy, 89% observed wildlife and/or plants and 87% walked or hiked in their native forests. Of the 63% of respondents who indicated that they had plans for their native forest over the next 10 years, it was found that 83% indicated that it was important to maintain their native forest for solitude or privacy, 81% for observing wildlife and/or plants, and 79% for maintaining or improving the native forest for its natural beauty.

Generally, activities concerned with supporting the property obtained lower responses. For example, of those respondents who indicated that they used their native forest in the previous year, it was found that

57% collected timber for on-property use, 50% acted to reduce fire risk and 45% controlled pests or diseases.

Activities focused on earning an income from native forests in the previous year received some of the lowest responses, as only 5% farmed non-timber forest products for sale and 4% harvested timber for sale. Although the short time frame arguably played a part in these low percentages for earning an income, a similar pattern occurred in responses to the intention questions.

Although the dominance of recreation and aesthetic uses may come as a surprise to some, it mirrors similar findings overseas, as does the lower interest and activity in timber harvesting.

VALUING FORESTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Private forest landowners, on the whole, have a high degree of ecological sensitivity, indicated by an awareness of the impacts of their actions on the environmental condition of their forest and the species in it. Further, they have a strong sense of stewardship over their forest. Interestingly, 53% agreed (and 40% disagreed) that 'owners of native forest on private property should be able to do as they please with their forests', while 78% agreed (and 12% disagreed) that 'government should have a strong role in overseeing landowner use of their forest'. The apparent contradiction between these results may indicate landowners believe they are able to take care of their own forests but that others may need more oversight, although it is not possible to explain these results without further study.

When asked questions on their environmental values, landowners agreed strongly with eco-centric statements in which the environment is seen as worthy of protection or preservation. They agreed less strongly with utilitarian statements in which the environment is valued for the use and benefits it provides for humans. The majority disagreed with pro-development statements in which it is considered acceptable to exploit the environment in a possibly destructive way for economic gain. However, some of the results, particularly the high level of agreement with the statement that 'if carefully managed, privately owned native forest can both provide products from the forest and conservation outcomes', indicate that landowners can hold both eco-centric values and be willing to consider using their forests to obtain certain goods (such as timber for on-property use).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS ON USES AND VALUES

Uses that landowners in South-East NSW make of their native forest are many and varied. Uses of a recreational or aesthetic nature are the most commonly engaged in on a day-to-day basis. They are also the most commonly planned uses that landowners wish to undertake during the next 10 years. This, in part, may relate to the amount of energy and time that has to be applied to undertake more complex and involved activities, but there appears enough evidence to cautiously suggest that many landowners are quite comfortable with this form of relationship with their native forests. Further, use of native forests by landowners to support the property or household are, by and large, less common than recreation or aesthetic uses. These include the harvesting of timber for on-property use, reducing fire risk and controlling pests and diseases, all of which are carried out by about half of the respondents to the survey who indicated that they used their forests. Generally, the least important uses, both current and planned, are those that contribute to an income or earnings. Included in this are the specific uses of harvesting timber and the more general provision of employment opportunities.

Private forest landowners generally indicated an awareness of their native forests as an important part of the landscape, both social and natural. They largely recognise the role their forests may play in the lives of future generations and value both their own forests and forests in the landscape for their inherent value and for their value as sources of beauty and leisure. The role of government in overseeing native forest on private land is recognised, but landowners clearly are protective of their private rights in relation to control over their forests. Finally, even though there appears a general resistance to production activities in native forests, there also appears an understanding that, with care, native forests can yield forest products and be conserved at the same time (although this issue needs more exploration to determine just 'which' forest products and how they would be obtained while meeting certain conservation goals).

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS ON RESPONDENTS

- Median age of respondents was 52 years and this was well above the median age of Bega Valley and Bombala Shire respondents in the 2001 census.
- The survey population was more highly educated compared to the population of the Bega Valley and Bombala Shires in the 2001 census.
- Average length of property ownership was 26 years and approximately 75% of landowners had owned their property for less than 26 years.

- Property sizes ranged from 3 to 4,600 hectares (ha), while forest sizes ranged from 2 to 1,012 ha. Within this range the majority of landowners owned smaller properties, with the median property size being 47 ha with a median forest size of 30 ha. A small number of landowners owned the majority of land and forest.
- Sixty-five percent of respondents had their primary residence on a rural property, while 16% lived in a capital city and another 6% in other cities with over 100,000 people. The remainder had their primary residences in towns or cities of less than 100,000.

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHOD

The data in this study was collected using a self-administered mail-questionnaire directed through a sample-survey framework. From a sample population of 1,758, a total of 625 people were randomly selected. The questionnaire was administered over August-September 2001. The total response rate from the 625 landowners selected was 375 (60%), although useable responses were 317 (51%). The data analysis was statistical. Finally, it is important to note that after an assessment of non-response to the survey, it was considered possible that the survey over-samples those landowners who are likely to be more sympathetic to positions that emphasise the protection or preservation of nature. The consequences of this statement, if true, should be kept in mind when reading the results from this research.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- This research was sponsored by South-East New South Wales Private Forestry and is a component of a Masters thesis undertaken (by Peter Deane) at the Australian National University.
- The report on the research is titled: *How private landowners use and value the native forest they own*. To obtain an electronic (Adobe PDF) copy of the report (file size is 5 MB), please direct your web browser towards: <<http://sres.anu.edu.au>> (and search on the title above).
- If you would like a copy of the (104 page) report mailed to you or to find out further information on managing private forests, please contact either Louise Maud or Cary Jones at SE NSW Private Forestry, P.O. Box 867, Bega, New South Wales, Australia, 2550. Telephone: (02) 6492 5578; Facsimile: (02) 6492 3700. E-mail: <maud@privateforestry.com>. WWW page: <<http://www.privateforestry.com>>.
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