Seeing the woods and the trees: cultural landscapes in forests

Background

The Commonwealth Government initiated Systematic Regional Forest Assessments in the early 1990s in response to the need for managers of forest resources to have comprehensive information on which to base their conservation and management decisions. This included a requirement to undertake comprehensive surveys and establish databases on the natural and cultural values of forests. Regional forest assessments were initially undertaken by the Commonwealth Government’s Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) in Western Australia, in partnership with the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management. This first project was restricted to a study of the natural values of the south-west karri forests, identifying significant heritage places for the Register of the National Estate. In 1992 the AHC began two similar but broader regional assessment projects in Victoria, focussed on the mountain-ash forests of the Central Highlands and the remote forests of East Gippsland. These projects included the identification of both cultural and natural heritage values, and the development of appropriate conservation advice for forest managers.

In 1996 the Commonwealth Government extended the comprehensive regional assessment approach by creating the Environment Forest Task Force within the Department of Environment, Sport and Territories. The task force now brings together teams of natural and cultural heritage professionals, together with other experts to assess the heritage, scientific, environmental, economic and social values of forests. This work will contribute to the development of a comprehensive source of data for managers of forest resources, and provide certainty for decision-making over the next 20 years. Further regional forest projects are currently being undertaken jointly by the Commonwealth Government and State Governments in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia and southern Queensland.

A cultural landscape approach

The first two Victorian projects were important steps in developing an appropriate methodology for regional forest assessment work, particularly in marrying the data for both cultural and natural values in a way that was meaningful and relevant for forest resource managers. Extensive data collection and mapping exercises were conducted, including:

- Disturbance histories to determine where forests had been affected by human activity (primarily tree felling and land clearing by early European settlers).
- Research and surveys of Aboriginal and historic archaeological sites and places associated with post-contact history.
- Compiling existing data about historic places.
- Undertaking new historical research and surveys of historic and other national estate values including aesthetic and social values.
- Community workshops to provide direct community participation in identifying social values in the regions.

Paper presented by
Joy McCann for Sandy Blair

Dr. Sandy Blair is an historian working in the Environment Forest Taskforce of Environment Australia in Canberra. She has been involved in developing methodologies for studies of cultural values in forests.
The concept of cultural landscapes proved to be a valuable one in developing the methodology for regional forest assessments as well as for landscape resource management planning. As part of the methodology used in the first two Victorian regional assessment projects, the AHC identified key regional themes relating to the history of human occupation of the regions. These themes illustrated the different eras of occupation and use, ending up with complex sequences or layers of cultural features in particular areas, often linked by their history of use and, in some cases, forming significant cultural landscapes. These cultural landscapes were identified in areas where phases of human activity or association had created a cultural pastiche of human history within the forest landscape, or where apparently disparate sites across the forest landscape were found to have tangible links or associations that revealed significant aspects of the forest’s human history.

Case study: identifying cultural landscapes in forests

Water resource management was defined as a major regional theme in the European history of the Central Highlands in Victoria. The Central Highlands regional assessment project resulted in the identification of several significant cultural landscapes that reflect the history of managing Melbourne’s water catchments and storage reservoirs. These landscapes include extensive linear networks or systems of aqueducts, as well as more complex landscapes associated with different eras of land use, such as timber harvesting, farming, and recreational activities. In this case study, I would like to briefly illustrate the importance of a cultural landscape approach to forest resource management, by describing the Wallaby Creek aqueduct system.

This linear network of granite-lined channels was constructed from 1883, tapping the fast-flowing streams that dissected the mountain-ash forests to the north of Melbourne. The first attempt to provide Melbourne’s gold-rush population had been the building of Yan Yean Reservoir in the early 1850s. However, whilst it was hailed as one of the largest artificial reservoirs in the world at that time, the precious water quickly became polluted by the farmlands that drained into it and the lead pipes that carried it to the city. The unpolluted mountain creeks in the Great Dividing Range beyond Yan Yean were eventually harnessed and redirected to flow through an elaborately engineered system of hand-cut granite aqueducts, tunnels and weirs. The open channels were designed to direct and slow the flow of water as it entered Jack’s Creek channel, then to empty its silt into the Toorourrong Reservoir, before finally making its way by channel and pipe to Yan Yean. The reservoir itself became a popular picnic destination, and the reservoir park was established over time as a recreational area for generations of Melburnians.

Continuing use of the aqueduct system, together with a closed forest catchment policy (where public access to the forests was limited), has ensured the survival
of this water supply system, including the remarkable series of granite steps known as the Cascades built in 1885. Perhaps more vulnerable to deterioration or catchment management policies are the exotic trees, fireplaces and clearings in the forest landscape near the channels, representing the scattered remains of construction camps associated with the scheme. Then there are the quarries that yielded the granite for the skilled stonemasons who shaped the channels and weirs. The channels also pass by early-20th century plantations of Californian redwood and Oregon, as well as the buildings, domestic water supply system and dugout associated with the catchment administration.

Collectively, the system of channels, tunnels, weirs, and reservoir represents a linear cultural landscape of considerable cultural significance, both in the history of water management in Australia and within the region’s forest history. The Wallaby Creek aqueduct system represents a cultural thread within the natural forest environment, and requires a forest management policy that recognises the cultural significance not only of the system’s engineering and technical achievements, but also of the historical context that the surrounding forest provides.

Conclusion
The concept of cultural landscapes has great potential for understanding and managing cultural elements and systems within natural areas. It is not only an important tool for understanding the extensive and often disparate cultural places that lie within forest landscapes, but it has also become a land management tool for governments whose responsibility it is to ensure that their policies address the particular conservation needs of both cultural and natural heritage values of our forests.