

Washpool

During the SPCC Border Ranges Inquiry, officers of the Forestry Commission said that we were mistaken in claiming that the Border Ranges contained the largest area of unlogged rainforest in NSW because Washpool, west of Grafton, was much larger. As we knew nothing about Washpool, Haydn Washington and Rodney Falconer, members of the Colong and Colo Committees, made a visit in 1979 and Peter Prineas then led a small party from NPA which reported favourably on its rainforest value and its suitability as a wilderness National Park.

In fact, Peter Helman and his study team at the University of New England had listed Washpool as one of the 26 areas satisfying their definition of wilderness in their *Wilderness in Australia* (1976). The report, which was funded by a National Estate grant applied for by the Colong Committee, identified a core area of 26,000 hectares under the control of the Forestry Commission which lay north of the Gwydir Highway running between Grafton and Glen Innes.

Washpool differed from the Border Ranges in that it was mostly warm temperate rainforest rather than sub-tropical. The Willowie Scrub, containing the largest stand of coachwood in the world, was the only discrete area of rainforest; elsewhere wet sclerophyll intermingled with the rainforest to form a mosaic. Extraction of the hardwood would result in as much disturbance of the rainforest as would the logging of the rainforest itself. The anger of the timber lobby at the possible loss of this huge hardwood resource was understandable, but its harvesting would have meant the end of the rainforest – a vital aspect on which our opponents were silent.

The Forestry Commission's *Indigenous Forest Policy* was based on the need to overcome the expected hardwood timber shortfall, due to earlier overcutting, until the coastal forests were ready for a second cutting cycle. Thus the policy which applied to Washpool was that "the more mountainous and less accessible forests behind the coastal plain should be logged for sawlogs to the limit of economic accessibility".

There was considerable frustration in the conservation camp during 1980 and 1981 due to the lack of Government action following two Inquiries:

The terms of reference of the Border Ranges Inquiry were so circumscribed by the need to protect employment that the result was an unacceptable compromise.

The terms of reference of the Terania Creek Inquiry were so restricted that the Judge rejected as irrelevant vital matters such as alternate land use and reforestation.

Washpool was now in dispute, but before the long awaited EIS was made public, Minister Don Day informed a meeting of the Grafton Chamber of Commerce on 9 March 1980 that “when the EIS on Washpool is completed the forest will be logged”. NCC immediately protested to the Premier that clearly a decision had already been made and therefore it “saw little point in participating in a third time-consuming and frustrating inquiry into rainforest logging in as many years”.

Although the need for transparency in Government was not recognised then as it is now, nevertheless it became obvious that in these circumstances the Forestry Commission could not be the determining authority for its own EIS. Ironically, therefore, it was Don Day’s revelation of the Commission’s intention to ignore the much acclaimed EIS process, which, in turn, made it possible to win Washpool. Don Day told the *Herald*:

The closest conservationists ever come to rainforest is in front of television. I’ve been in the rainforest and I know the industry. I think it would be criminal for a Labor Government to put people out of work when there can be no justification.

The Colong Committee prepared a detailed submission on the EIS in which it pointed out that the logging of Washpool was recommended on economic and social grounds without regard for the effect on the environment. The Committee called for its rejection because in preparing the EIS the Forestry Commission had failed to comply with Regulation 56.(2).(H) of the Environmental Protection and Assessment Act which stated that any feasible alternatives must be considered.

One alternative which had not been considered was the Bathurst plantation pine, despite the fact that 350,000 cubic metres would be available from 1988 and 1 million cubic metres from 2000, 10 times the annual Washpool hardwood quotas of 32,000 cubic metres. Another alternative source, and the one ultimately used, was the unallocated rainforest in the Casino West Management Area, available because the Commission did not favour transfer of timber across management boundaries.

The EIS classified the Washpool forests on commercial rather than ecological principles. Although it was obvious that as a result of the extraction of 60 per cent of the upper canopy in the 4,724 hectares of moist hardwood, considerable damage would occur to the rainforest in the lower canopy, the EIS made the facile comment that “no doubt the understorey would be partially damaged by logging” and, more honestly, “regeneration . . . can generally be expected to be low”.

There were five mills dependent on Washpool for long-term operations:

	<i>Jobs</i>	<i>Quota cubic metres</i>
1 Rainforest Mill (Big River Timbers)	70	6,260
3 Hardwood Mills in Grafton Mgt. Area	79	32,160
1 Hardwood Mill in Casino West Mgt. Area	31	6,460

The Colong Submission urged that Washpool remain in its natural wilderness state because it contained:

- The only remaining rainforest wilderness in NSW.
- The largest coachwood forest in the world.
- A highly complex mosaic of forest types.

Estimates of the number of jobs which would be lost if Washpool became a National Park varied widely. In a report commissioned by ACS, Dr James Kable of the Queensland Institute of Technology predicted 500 direct jobs and 2,000 in the district. NPA commissioned a report from Energy Planning Impact consultants which estimated that the loss would be 40-115 in the timber industry and 60-175 in the region. The Forestry Commission claimed in the EIS that 250 direct jobs would be lost. The Premier, facing a hostile demonstration in Grafton, again declared that no jobs would be lost.

In order to achieve sustained yield, the Forestry Commission imposed a 50 per cent quota cut on the local mills. Kerry Pidcock, Manager of Big River Timbers, publicly threatened immediate closure of his mill, which employed 70 people, unless he was given permission to log the Viper scrub, a rainforest area vital to the integrity of the wilderness. Intending to yield to the threat, the Minister prepared a submission to Cabinet, but prior to the meeting TEC and Colong organised a media conference which yielded excellent coverage on Channels 2 and 7. In addition, the Premier received telegrams from Labor Party branches prior to the Cabinet meeting on 4 June, at which the Forestry Commission was directed to obtain supplies from other areas. The Premier again assured the media that no jobs would be lost, but the issue was particularly difficult as Grafton was in Don Day's electorate and jobs were certainly at risk.

The owner of Duncan's mill, the largest in Grafton, then went on the offensive, calling for conservationists to be treated with contempt for wanting to lock up the bush and destroy jobs. He claimed that the only endangered species in the district was the timber workers. Locals organised a protest group known as LEAF (Ladies Environmental Awareness of Forests) and the mill employees joined TWIG (Timber Workers in Grafton). These groups carried out very effective demonstrations in front of Parliament House and were on hand when Cabinet met in Grafton on 23 April 1980.

Kerry Pidcock was one of our toughest opponents. The mill he owned manufactured marine ply from its annual quota of 6,260 cubic metres of coachwood from Washpool. According to the Australian Standard 2272, marine ply could only be made from rainforest timbers, of which coachwood was the most important. However, research indicated that alternative timbers could be peeled. Two veneer mills in the Coffs Harbour district were successfully peeling flooded gum and other eucalypt species. I appealed to the plywood industry body to support a change in the Australian Standard in order to save the Washpool coachwood, but they replied that they would only be prepared to do so when the coachwood supply was exhausted. It was not until a year later that forestry consultant Neil Byron of Forest Technical Services Pty Ltd made public the restrictive specification in the Australian Standard. He reported to the Department of Environment and Planning: "if other veneer mills can change to hardwoods, then it seems likely that Big River Timbers can do likewise". Aware that coachwood was used by the Department of Defence, NCC sought and received their support for the deletion of coachwood from Australian Standard 2272 for marine plywood used by them.

A decade before the rainforest campaign I had been involved in the move by the Colong Committee to prevent the Forestry Commission using Federal funds to plant *pinus radiata* on the Boyd Plateau in the Blue Mountains. After a long and acrimonious fight we succeeded in having the area gazetted as part of Kanangra Boyd National Park. The information gained in that campaign enabled me to calculate the huge volume of softwoods in the plantations in the Bathurst area which would become available in the late 1980s. As it seemed logical to me that some of this surplus timber could be used to ease the acute shortage of softwood forecast on the North Coast, I wrote a number of articles and lobbied everyone who would listen, advocating that one of the Grafton mills be given financial assistance to relocate to Bathurst. The case became even more compelling when Timber Industries Ltd, the sawmill using the Bathurst resource at the rate of 100,000 cubic metres per annum, revealed that it was planning to export the surplus pine when it became available. Allen Taylor and Co Ltd, which had a quota of 5,260 cubic metres of hardwood in the Washpool area, was insisting that its commitment be honoured, yet both companies were wholly owned subsidiary companies of BMI Ltd. Unfortunately what I thought was a brilliant idea was completely ignored by both the Government and the timber industry, the only support coming from the Institute of Foresters.

A small group of courageous Grafton residents led by two school teachers, Peter Morgan and Stan Mussared, together with Celia Smith and Greg Clancy, formed the Clarence Valley branch of NPA, thereby incurring many threats and encountering considerable vindictiveness. Bob Ryan, organiser of the ABC's *City Extra* radio program, brought together conservationists and timber workers at a meeting in Grafton on 20 October 1980. Peter Prineas and I attended in order to support the valiant NPA members, but each side was so entrenched that a compromise was impossible.

When the EIS was finally issued two days before Christmas in 1980, the campaign intensified. In Sydney, NPA, TEC, the Colong Committee and the ACF co-operated in the production and distribution of a pamphlet written by Haydn Washington and Rodney Falconer. Four photographs by Leo Meier of disastrous logging scenes were used on thousands of postcards distributed for dispatch to the Premier. Media tours to Washpool were organised and deputations to bureaucrats and politicians took place.

The members of the NPA executive experienced local antagonism at first hand when they held their State Council meeting in Grafton in June 1980. To avoid the impending confrontation organised by the *Grafton Examiner*, the meeting place in the city was changed, but when the party visited Washpool itself they were confronted by a hostile crowd of timber workers. In a conciliatory gesture, the Forestry Commission proposed the gazettal of the coachwood in the Willowie Scrub as a Flora Reserve, but after the debacle of Gradys Creek, we were not impressed.

Cabinet had earlier decided that the Department of Environment and Planning (DEP) rather than the Forestry Commission should assume responsibility for assessing their Impact Statements. Believing that the Forestry Commission was being economical with the truth about alternative supplies, John Whitehouse, head of DEP's Environment Planning Division, persuaded his Minister Eric Bedford, on 16 January 1982, to use an interstate consultant, Forest Technical Services Pty Ltd (Fortech), to prepare a *Review of Possible Timber Supplies as Alternatives to the Washpool Area*. Within a month they reported that there were alternative sawlogs in sufficient quantity to continue current mill quotas and therefore employment in five of the six sawmills in the Grafton and Casino Management Areas for the next twenty years, by which time the second cutting cycle would be possible in the regrowth forests.

Neil Byron of Fortech wrote in *The People's Forest* (1999):

It was not a pleasant time in my life. Ken Groves and I were subject to very intense pressures to say what the timber industry, unions and the Forestry Commission wanted and they were in a very strong position. We both received threats. I even had anonymous telephone calls trying to threaten me by targeting my children. Politically it was hot. The Cabinet was split down the middle. As it turned out, the investigation was pretty straight-forward despite the political heat and the emotion.

When the Premier used their consultancy report to convince Cabinet that Grafton would not become a ghost town, there was outrage within the timber industry and the Forestry Commission. Wal Gentle wrote to Byron's boss at ANU demanding his dismissal! Fortech was blackballed by the Commission, which even tried to impose clearly illegal secondary boycotts on Fortech. The NSW Division of the Institute of Foresters set up a special investigation which continued for several years, but Byron and Groves were not expelled – probably because the Institute had to concede that their arguments were sound. Neil Byron concluded: "It really annoyed senior executives of the Forestry Commission that they could not touch me, mainly because I was an academic and I had an international career".

For the first time in the rainforest campaign, large and expensive display advertisements appeared in Sydney newspapers. NPA spent \$3,000 on one (increasing membership as a result), and Dick Smith, who had long been sympathetic, inserted another. Inevitably the Forestry Commission and ACS responded, and as a direct result, letters to the *Herald* proliferated. Rodney Falconer had several articles published in the *Herald* and the ACS distributed a brochure entitled *Let the Light Shine Through*, which infuriated conservationists because it made misleading claims. As a result of all this excellent publicity, by mid-1980 Washpool joined the Border Ranges and Terania Creek as a highly recognisable rainforest dispute.