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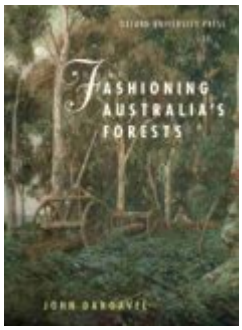
John Dargavel. *Fashioning Australia's Forests.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995. xvi + 312 pp. A$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-553526-6.



Reviewed by Warwick Frost

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The export of woodchips from Australian native forests over the last few decades has been one of Australia's greatest economic and environmental disasters. Heavily subsidised and poorly managed, wood chipping has continued despite the trend amongst Australia's policy makers towards the rhetoric of economic rationalism. Even though only those with a vested interest could argue for wood chipping on economic grounds, it has managed to gain the strong support of both Labour and Liberal/National Parties. Yet despite these contradictions and the enormous passion the wood chipping debate generates, historians have tended to ignore this issue. John Dargavel's excellent history of Australian forestry goes a long way to filling this gap.

The export of woodchips began in 1968. Before then Australian timber exports were restricted by the nature of our forests. The magnificent coastal forests were full of tall fast-growing trees, but they were the wrong ones. Australia's forests were predominantly eucalypt hardwoods, but the modern world, particularly the construction industry, demanded softwoods. By the end of the nineteenth century Australia's scarce softwoods, such as the hoop and kauri pines of Queensland, had been logged out and attempts at growing them in plantations were failures. Eucalypts were useful for some construction work, indeed a small export trade in paving blocks and railway sleepers developed, but they were too hard and too prone to shrinkage, warping and splitting for use in most building. As Australia's cities grew, their construction timber needs were primarily met by imported softwoods. Oregon framing and baltic pine floorboards became commonplace in Australian housing. Despite technological changes which allowed the greater utilisation of eucalypts, this pattern of Australia as a net importer of timber continued due to established tastes and construction methods and our ever-growing demand for timber.

In 1968 wood chipping for export began in Eden NSW and quickly spread to other states. In those heady days of the 'Resources Boom', it was hoped that exports and jobs would finally begin to flow from Australia's unique and difficult forests. Ironically the woodchip industry developed in

Australia due to strong concerns for the environment in Japan. After World War Two, Japanese demand for paper soared. Japan's forests were unable to meet this demand, they had already been heavily exploited in the 1930s and 1940s. Plantations were not yet mature, and increased cutting and resulting degradation was highly unpopular. The solution was to gain woodchips from elsewhere on the Pacific Rim and conserve Japan's forests. In the 1960s they began negotiations with Australian governments which were keen to develop new resource-based export industries (it's worth noting that the major forest states: NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, had missed out on the benefits of the mining boom). Due to the history of difficulties with eucalypts and market preference for timber imports, very few private timber plantations had been developed. Instead wood chippers were given access to publicly-owned forests.

The introduction of wood chipping coincided with a growing concern for the environment and an increasing dissatisfaction with government policies of development at all costs. To keep costs low in woodchipping, forests were clear-felled, that is, all trees and vegetation cleared, the best logs were chipped and the remainder burnt. At Eden, early clear-felling took place close to town and was visible from the busy Princes Highway. Public outrage led to woodchipping joining the farming of the Little Desert, sand mining on Fraser Island and the damming of Lake Pedder as the key environmental battles of the 1960s and 1970s. However, while these others have been primarily resolved, woodchipping continues to be one of the major environmental issues today.

Initially concern about woodchipping focussed on the environmental impact of clear-felling. However, it also slowly became apparent that wood chipping was not economically viable. The chips were low value exports and processing occurred overseas. The revenue from the felling of publicly-owned timber was far less than the administration costs. The industry only operated under huge subsidies. Forestry employment actually fell (and continues to fall) after the introduction of woodchipping. Erosion, damage to water catchments, the spread of dieback and the failure of regeneration all increased the public costs of an economic activity which benefited only a few.

Dargavel's work is essential reading for anyone interested in the woodchipping debate, Australia's environmental history, or indeed Australian politics. Well written and presented, it makes very good use of photographs, diagrams, maps and boxed 'summaries' (some examples: on page 145 there are the dates of formation of Australia's main conservation bodies and on page 164 a list of the main arguments against woodchipping).

Even a work of this size cannot hope to cover all the issues relating to woodchipping and forestry. More research is needed. Dargavel notes that studies of the sociology of timber towns are lacking and that forest clearance for agriculture is not covered in this work. I would like to read an analysis of how forestry has changed the structure of native forests (encouraging certain plants and discouraging others). A history of abandoned farmland reverting to forests is needed. Finally, an analysis of why the Labor Party supports woodchipping would be most interesting.

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