Conservation, timber and perceived values at Mt Field, Tasmania

Kevin Kiernan

Introduction

Mt Field is a small mountain plateau the highest point of which, Mt Field West (1434 metres), overlooks a production forest in the Florentine Valley that today isolates it from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. While biodiversity has become the driving force in contemporary nature conservation, it was the scenic values of a landform, Russell Falls, now a Tasmanian tourism icon, that first triggered conservation initiatives in this part of Tasmania. This involved the first reservation of land for conservation purposes in Tasmania, 13 years after the declaration of the world’s first national park at Yellowstone, USA. Three decades later, a larger national park was established at Mt Field, again the first in Tasmania. But subsequent revocation of part of the park to allow logging meant that rather than preserving the area for future generations it was not to survive intact for even a single human generation. This paper traces the history of Mt Field National Park and considers how perceptions of the area have impinged on the conservation of its natural values, including its important regions with underground drainage, or ‘karst’ landforms, such as caves. It also explores some wider impacts of events at Mt Field upon conservation in Tasmania.
Evolution of the National Park

Hidden beauty of the Red Rocks

The significance of T. H. Osmel's 1916 letter to the Board of Directors of the Red Rocks Park Association, which was convened in response to the growing demand for a national monument in the area, is evident in the following extract from his letter:

"The Red Rocks National Monument is a unique natural feature that has been a source of inspiration and recreation for generations. It is a testament to the beauty and diversity of the American landscape. The monument was established to protect the natural beauty of the area and to ensure that it remains accessible to the public. The Red Rocks National Monument is a shining example of the importance of preserving our natural heritage for future generations."
in the 1890s. A small area (20 ha) around the entrance to Junee Cave was for many decades indicated on county charts as 'reserved land' though from what date is uncertain (Kiernan 1974). In correspondence with the renowned NSW government geologist, Oliver Trickett, in 1917, the Tasmanian Government geologist, W.H. Twelvetrees, erroneously indicated that Junee Cave lay 'in National Park reserve' (Twelvetrees 1917), although the wording is slightly ambiguous. This raises the possibility that a disjunct part of the intended park may have slipped from the final proclamation. By this time the probability was recognised that the main headwaters of the underground Junee River lay 9-10 kilometres distant in the Florentine Valley below Mt Field West. In his correspondence with Trickett, Twelvetrees also referred to these 'Mt Field Caves on Mt Field West (Mt Humboldt) ... on the reserve recently created for a national park' (Twelvetrees 1917, Middleton 1991).

Further proclamations under the Scenery Preservation Act extended the park to 15 583 hectares (18 February 1919), then 16 690 hectares (10 June 1930), then 17 028 hectares (29 May 1940). An area below Mt Field West preserved a small sample of the Eucalyptus regnans forest of the Florentine Valley. It was from this valley that most of the thylacines exhibited in the old Hobart zoo were later captured, most recently in 1933, further sightings in this area being reported as recently as 1952 and 1980 (Sharland 1962, Smith 1981). But it was the old-growth forest rather than this charismatic carnivore that underpinned reservation here. National Park Reserve was renamed Mt Field National Park in 1947. Its reconstituted National Park Board still reflected the predominantly utilitarian aspirations of government.

In officially opening the National Park on 13 October 1917, Governor Newdegate noted one of its important attributes was that it contained some of the finest timber in Tasmania. Both his remarks and the afternoon's entertainment—woodchopping events—were to prove prophetic. Government aspirations for economic development west of Mt Field saw track construction and futile attempts at pastoral settlement from the 1850s until after World War II (Kostoglou 1996). With Parliament's approval, the Government granted a forest concession over 124 000 hectares in the Florentine Valley in 1932 that enabled Australian Newsprint Mills Pty Ltd to open the country's first newsprint mill near Hobart in 1941. Subsequently, the company made several attempts to secure access to the national park forest beneath Mt Field West that had been specifically excluded from the original concession. After an attempt in 1946 to have the park boundary changed failed for legal reasons, the company proposed to compensate the park with alternative areas from the company's concession. Australian Newsprint Mills, in correspondence to the Premier (2 January 1948), asserted that the area below Mt Field West contained 'faulty trees' that would 'warrant only a salvage operation', but that as:

an integral part of the high forest of the Florentine Valley [they] should be worked, regenerated and fire-protected as such. In view of...the important part this belt of forest...which is partly within and partly outside of the existing boundary of the National Park...will play in maintaining log supplies...the company is prepared to undertake this work (Kessell 1948).

Resulting public debate bore many hallmarks of later Australian conservation disputes. A submission by the Australian Natives Association and a subsequent Parliamentary inquiry usefully summarises conservationist objections: opposition to any park alienation to permit commercial encroachment; a claim the forest was the only one of its type in any Tasmanian national park; its potential value as a tourist attraction; disputation of the alleged quality of the forest in the proposed compensation area; and concern that revocation might prove the thin edge of a wedge that would allow logging in other parks (Peterson 1949). The company and Government attempted to stampede a favourable decision by claiming that if Australian Newsprint Mills did not gain access to the park timber it would have to close its mill. The development lobby consistently sought to belittle the conservation value of the revocation area and to inflate the conservation value of the proposed compensation area. There was considerable concern that backroom deals included promises to the company which the Government was desperate to honour. Immediately after the 1948 State elections, the debate took a new tack when development proponents and the Government suggested that doubt existed as to the true position of the park boundary. This was notwithstanding protestsations by the Australian Natives Association that six maps printed by the Government since the park was proclaimed all clearly showed the disputed forests to be well inside the park. A Parliamentary committee inquiring into the revocation proposal became side-tracked by this boundary issue and defined an entirely new boundary, although providing no justification for it. However, when the Government subsequently took legislation to Parliament, the preamble to the National Park and Florentine Valley Bill 1949 acknowledged the reality that it provided for 'transfer of a certain area of Mt Field National Park' to the company.
Congratulations on the recognition of your National Park. This is a remarkable achievement.

For more information or assistance, please contact the National Park Service.

241 NPS NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, 215
stability, together with proper management of recreational impacts, are key requirements for protection of this remarkable underground heritage.

Logging that followed the revocation of the Mt Field West forests occurred at a time when the presence of caves in the general area was well known but documentation remained very deficient and there was little understanding of their value or sensitivity. Road construction, timber felling and extraction practices saw serious soil erosion including scalping of vulnerable karst soils that control the chemistry and release of critical natural seepage to caves. Debris was dumped into sinkholes that fed water underground, causing sedimentation of underground streams. In 1976 consultants reporting upon another matter made incidental mention of logging having caused deposition of over 1 metre of sediment in one cave below Mt Field West, blocking access into it (Richards and Ollier 1976).

New caves were found in the area revoked, both within the Junee catchment and further north. The Welcome Stranger Cave (discovered 1969) is a highly decorated stream cave over a kilometre long. The new park boundary left one-half of this cave in Mt Field National Park and the other half in production forest, which was then clear-felled. Dehydration and consequent physical degradation of the previously sparkling flowstones in the cave followed logging, probably due to increased water uptake by the dense regrowth scrub. Several significant caves have since been discovered in the area added to the southern side of the park to compensate for the revocation area, but because disturbance at the upstream extremity of a river cave system enables environmental damage to be transmitted downstream through the entire system, disturbance of the area under Mt Field West was the worst possible scenario for the Junee River system. Moreover, even the caves in the compensation area were now to feel direct onslaught.

Wildfires occurred in the Russell Falls area in the 1890s and in 1934. In 1949 Premier Cosgrove asserted that the proposed revocation area had never been accessible to visitors and that ‘the access would be through the road the company was to construct and, because of fire risk, picnic parties could not use it’ (The Mercury, 3 February 1949). He expressed a markedly different view of the compensation area: ‘It is an area which can be protected from fire by the combined efforts of rangers and the company’s fire patrols’ (The Mercury, 22 March 1949). But notwithstanding such convenient assurances, a fire caused major damage in 1960. Its origin is contentious, but may have been in the logging concession. It burnt out a substantial area in and adjacent to the Humboldt Valley and much of the compensation area which, during his 1948 lobbying, the Forestry Commissioner had told the Premier should and could be protected for all time. Then in 1966 further intense fires that originated as management burns in the Australian Newsprint Mills concession caused major damage to other parts of the park, including destroying the slow-growing, fire-sensitive, high-altitude vegetation on Tarn Shelf in the central part of Mt Field National Park, so valued by early park advocates such as Rodway—damage that may take a millennium or more to heal. Large areas of forest overlying karst were also burned.

Forest vegetation at lower altitudes had formerly maintained the stability of steep slopes through the binding action of tree roots and the reduction in soil pore water pressures by transpiration. After the fires, landslides began to occur on some steeper slopes around the Mt Field Plateau as the roots of fire-killed trees rotted out, and still longer-term changes in slope stability were triggered. Massive volumes of sediment flooded into some cave streamminks to the detriment of water quality, underground aquatic ecosystems and cave scenery. The great clarity of the stream in Welcome Stranger Cave had initially been celebrated, but a major landslide now occurred inside the park where forest had been killed by the fire lit by Australian Newsprint Mills that escaped from its logging concession. The landslide reached the streammink that feeds Welcome Stranger so that the cave stream still often runs turbidly nearly two decades later, and considerable silt has been deposited through the cave (Kiernan et al. 1993). Another major landslide over a kilometre long plummeted from a burnt-out area in the compensation area on Wheretts Lookout. At least one karst streammink was buried entirely and the river emerging from Junee Cave more than seven kilometres distant ran heavily turbid.

Logging inside the remaining National Park

So much for the revocation and its aftermath, but a less well-known phase of logging deep inside some areas that remained national park was to follow, unleashing a new wave of impacts. In 1966 a Forestry Commission report suggested that salvaging the trees in Mt Field National Park killed by escaped Australian Newsprint Mills fires would probably not benefit regeneration and would increase the fire hazard considerably for at least 10 years afterwards, although the magnitude of that hazard could be reduced by burning after logging (Gilbert 1966). But on Black Tuesday, 7 February 1967, bushfires elsewhere in southern Tasmania killed 62 people and destroyed over 1300 homes, profoundly sensitising the population with regard to issues of fire hazard. Less than a fortnight after the Black Tuesday fires, Forestry
Impacts on Value

Section 614 of the National Environmental Policy Act requires the preparation of an environmental impact statement for major Federal actions significantly affecting the human environment. The statement describes the environmental impact of the proposed action, including its cumulative impact, and provides a basis for an informed public discussion of the alternatives. The statement is prepared to ensure that the Federal Government fully considers the environmental consequences of its actions and provides the public with an opportunity to express their views on the proposed action. The statement is a critical tool in promoting informed decision-making and public participation in environmental decision-making processes. The preparation of the environmental impact statement is a legal requirement under the National Environmental Policy Act, and it serves as a formal record of the environmental considerations that have been taken into account in the development of a proposed action. The statement is a public document that provides a comprehensive overview of the environmental implications of the proposed action, including its potential impacts on the environment, human health, and quality of life. The statement is a valuable resource for decision-makers, environmentalists, and the public, as it provides a clear and transparent record of the environmental considerations that have been taken into account in the development of the proposed action.
damage to caves by blasting, soil erosion, landslips, cave stream siltation, and failed regeneration of forest.

Simmonds (1975) recommended measures to encourage revegetation of disturbed areas and disperse road drainage:

Problems are encountered on the higher elevations and over limestone outcrops where eucalypts are either slow or impossible to re-establish, and in these areas it seems preferable to sow mixed native species as many occur in similar situations to ‘cover the scars’ of logging.

But Parks Minister Batt’s 1977 letter to his constituent suggests there was no seeding or planting after 1973. Notwithstanding the obvious impacts of the roads, Batt advised: ‘at this stage there has been no action on the logging roads’ using as an excuse ‘they could be useful fire trails and access in the event of future outbreaks’. A later recommendation by a park ranger that the company be requested to close the roads at the park boundary (Eden 1977) also appears to have borne no fruit. These areas remain sources of sediment input to the karst even today. The potentially ongoing implications of changes to karst water circulation caused by logging were highlighted in the early 1990s when sinkholes engulfed roads built towards the compensation area during salvage logging in the late 1960s.

Management through the 1980s and 1990s

The salvage logging of the 1960s and 1970s did not end incursions into the park, much of its boundary remaining unmarked on the ground. In 1992 forestry operations penetrated to within a stone’s throw of Russell Falls. Meanwhile, a new threat arose. Caves are often delicate environments where natural repair of visitor impacts occurs over geological rather than human time scales, where every broken stalactite and inadvertent muddy footprint on a crystalline flowstone floor is effectively permanent. Opening of many logging roads to public access during the 1990s allowed inexperienced cavers and casual visitors easy access to hundreds of caves. This would be a management nightmare for any Parks Service starved of sufficient funds to respond effectively, but many of these caves lie in State forest administered not by a conservation agency but by a development-focused corporation that has no cave management expertise. Most of those who remember the pristine beauty of the virgin Welcome Stranger Cave now prefer their memories to re-visiting a cave that has been rendered a shadow of its former splendour, due not to the fault of any particular agency or individuals but to deficiencies in the management system or, more accurately, the lack of one.

Greater recognition of the need for careful management of karst forests emerged following a 1984 study of the National Estate-listed Mole Creek area in northern Tasmania (Kiernan 1984). This had some positive spinoffs in the Tasmanian Woodchip Exports Commonwealth-State Memorandum of Understanding (1988), but that Memorandum also declared that ‘On the basis of advice from the Heritage Commission, Forest Operations can be carried out without adversely affecting the National Estate significance of the... Florentine Valley Caves’. A subsequent proposal to investigate problems associated with management of karst systems that extend beneath arbitrary land tenure boundaries such as those around Mt Field foiled after failing to receive essential Commonwealth funding. The Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association, the regional professional body of karst managers, recommended at its 1991 conference that the Junee-Florentine karst system simply be included in the park. Despite the advent of new forest practices legislation and special provisions for karst it was not until 1993 that funding became available to initiate an inventory of the Junee-Florentine karst (Eberhard 1998). Considerable further damage occurred in the interim (Kiernan et al. 1993) and the level of inventory achievable with the funding available, while very valuable, proved inadequate for detailed planning of forest operations.

Some informal planning and reservation decisions followed the karst inventory but karst was not included among the nationally-agreed criteria for the establishment of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System for Forests in Australia (JANIS Reserve Criteria). Hence, no secure karst reserves were established in the 1996-1997 Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement process. Although patently incomplete in scope, the Regional Forest Agreement has been promoted by some parties as being the last word on Tasmanian conservation, an imprimatur writ in stone. Some conservationists argue that stone had better be as soluble as the limestone in which the Junee-Florentine caves have formed, because some measure of recompense for the damage inflicted upon this important karst remains long overdue, together with meaningful rehabilitation initiatives.

Discussion

When opening Mt Field National Park in 1917 Governor Newdegate predicted that:
In responding to claims for the possession of mineral, none of the
National Park Service has any jurisdiction for the reasons that the
property of the National Park Service is not in public, and the
laws of the State of Nevada prohibit the issuance of any claims.

In addition, the property is not subject to the jurisdiction of the
National Park Service because it is not owned by the Federal
Government. The property is owned by the State of Nevada, and
the laws of the State of Nevada govern the ownership and
use of the property.

The property is not subject to the jurisdiction of the National
Park Service because it is not a public park. The property is
owned by the State of Nevada, and the laws of the State of
Nevada govern the ownership and use of the property.

The property is not subject to the jurisdiction of the National
Park Service because it is not a public park. The property is
owned by the State of Nevada, and the laws of the State of
Nevada govern the ownership and use of the property.

The property is not subject to the jurisdiction of the National
Park Service because it is not a public park. The property is
owned by the State of Nevada, and the laws of the State of
Nevada govern the ownership and use of the property.
Tasmania's National Parks have been permanently revoked to allow logging in areas once supposedly preserved in perpetuity. Mercer and Peterson (1986) have contrasted the extent of park revocation in Tasmania against a history of minimal revocation elsewhere in Australia and concluded that no other Australian State has adopted a policy of park revocation quite so readily. While Tasmania may have a greater percentage of its total area under reservation than any other State, this smallest State has permanently revoked a greater area of national parklands, in absolute area terms, than has any other, and possibly a greater area than the total revoked in all other States combined. And almost entirely for logging. Revocation was replaced in the 1960s and 1970s by mechanisms to permit development inside parks, as evident from the 'salvage' logging inside Mt Field National Park and the drowning of Lake Pedder, the latter leaving Tasmania's apparent area of national parks misleadingly inflated by a 240 square kilometre artificial reservoir.

Hence, Lake Pedder was not the birthplace of Australia's conservation movement nor was it even the first 'national' campaign, as evident from interstate representations on the Mt Field issue, for instance by the Queensland National Parks Association. The significance of the often overlooked campaign waged by those who resisted the Mt Field revocation was much greater than has been generally acknowledged, even in texts purporting to record the evolution of the Australian conservation movement (Hutton and Connors 1999, Mulligan and Hill 2001). Indeed, few contributors even to a recent history of Tasmanian forest conservation campaigns (Gee 2001) seem to recognise any history before their own.

Important management problems persist at Mt Field itself. In their correspondence to the Premier dated 2 January 1948, Australian Newsprint Mills claimed that giving it access to the western part of the park meant 'that the outlook over the forests of the Florentine Valley from the outstanding mountain peaks in the National Park will be enhanced and not spoilt by the Company's operations', apparently basing this view on the assumption that replacing 'over-mature' forest containing 'faulty' trees by regenerated forest would improve the scenery. No mention was made of the scars to be left by roads, quarrying and logging. The outlook from Mt Field West, the most celebrated summit within Mt Field National Park and a grandstand towards the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, has since been massively disturbed by logging of the original Australian Newsprint Mills concession, the revoked national parklands, and by un-rehabilitated logging roads and poorly-regenerating forest and alpine vegetation within the park itself. Park boundary design remains wholly inadequate, with arbitrary cadastral boundaries cutting across natural systems such as the caves. Meanwhile some sensitive caves are increasingly being destroyed due to the absence of any effective cave management.

Since the first conservation initiatives were taken at Mt Field, perspectives on the values of parks have evolved. The former focus on scenery, recreation and tourism has been overtaken by a greater emphasis on scientific approaches to the conservation of biodiversity. But environmental attributes other than biology remain under-recognised, undervalued and under-managed. The Junee-Florentine caves never featured significantly in the anti-revocation campaign by the conservation lobby and were given no account in the un-resisted decision to allow salvage logging in the remaining park. That same excessively biocentric focus which proved so detrimental to the conservation of wider environmental diversity at Mt Field remained evident in the neglect of geodiversity during the 1996-97 Regional Forest Agreement process, which left some of Australia's deepest and most important limestone caves still lacking adequate legislative protection.

Conservation activism continues to focus on tall trees, mirroring the scientific community's preoccupation with biodiversity, and bureaucratic and political responses to that narrow agenda. Meanwhile wider environmental diversity, and particularly geodiversity, still languishes. As the karstic arteries pulsing beneath Mt Field continue to face occlusion by sediment bleeding from the wounds inflicted, we should perhaps be asking ourselves how many other hidden values are being overlooked and undervalued in contemporary land allocation and forest management.

References