# What Are They Taking Us For? The Participatory Nature of Western Australia's Regional Forest Agreement Process

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The native forests of Western Australia (WA) have long been the subject of heated debate between policy makers, conservationists and the timber industry. A critical element of the forest dispute has been the issue of public input into the political decision-making processes responsible for forest policy. Over the last 40 years, there has been a growth in the demands by the public for active involvement in decisions on nature conservation in WA, which were largely met by a resistant and at times hostile political apparatus.

In this context, this paper offers an analysis of the participatory nature of WA's Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process during the late 1990s, a Federal Government initiative aimed at resolving the nation-wide forest dispute. WA RFA stakeholders' perceptions of the inclusiveness of the process are presented for the purpose of providing a gauge for the extent to which community demands for participation were enabled and also as an assessment of whether WA's RFA process qualifies as an example of good governance. The findings point toward a systemic failure in the management of the Western Australian RFA, for the process constrained opportunities for stakeholder input and deliberation-based decision-making. In this context, the authors highlight the need for an opening of political structures and processes to enable and facilitate active stakeholder participation.

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## Introduction

Any review of the history of Australian forest policy will refer to a conflict and processes best described as messy, complex and acrimonious (e.g. Chindarsi 1997; Dargavel 1998). The conflict over native forests in Australia represents a clash between forest conservation and production agendas that have been colliding since the late 1960s with the onset of the industrialisation of Australian native forests. All political attempts in the past failed to resolve the debate and at times even increased the polarisation between the various protagonists (Dargavel 1998). Government intervention often occurred in an *ad hoc* fashion, frequently lacking an understanding of the symbolic and ideological factors involved in forest disputes (Syme 1992; Lane 1999) and subsequently missing the mark in political and social acceptability. These interventions are described as participatory rituals (Mercer 1995) for they tended to ignore the views of the public and provided insufficient stakeholder access to the political decision-making processes.

In the early 1990s, the National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS; COA 1992) promised an end to the national stalemate in the forest debate. Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs), the intended vehicles for the operationalisation of the NFPS, were meant to deliver a balance between timber interests and conservation demands. In terms of public access, these agreements were purported to be different from past processes with both federal and state governments emphasising their inclusiveness and accessibility (see COA 1992; COA and WA 1996; Forests Taskforce 1996, 1997). Indeed, it was stressed that effective community involvement was regarded as important and critical to both the successful completion of RFAs and the durability of their outcomes. This meant that, for the first time, stakeholders and local communities were to be given the opportunity to be actively involved in the development of forest policy in their region (Coakes and Fenton 2001).

In light of this self-confessed recognition by governments of the importance of meaningful public input into environmental policy processes, this paper presents the results of a case study investigation into the RFA experience of Western Australia (WA). RFA stakeholders' perceptions of the public participation component of WA's RFA process are presented with a view to assessing its accessibility and inclusiveness. The data are presented and discussed against the background of principles developed for good governance and good community involvement, shedding light on the participative nature of this policy process.

Prior to the presentation of the RFA case study, an overview is presented of the contemporary literature on

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public participation and governance. This review provides the basis for the framework adopted for the analysis of WA's RFA process.

## Public participation and good governance

Active citizen participation in environmental decision-making is a widely accepted notion, at least among theorists (e.g. Kemp 1985; Renn et al. 1995; Buchy et al. 1999; Tuler and Webler 1999; Buchy and Race 2001; McCool and Guthrie 2001). Within the public policy arena, there is a growing recognition of the importance of governments' responsiveness to community demands, showing signs of a seemingly forgotten awareness that public participation is integral to democratic life. While some commentators warn of high associated costs (e.g. Davis 1996) or the inability of the masses to participate meaningfully (Schumpeter 1976), most writers in the field agree that more is seemingly better, implying that higher degrees of community involvement will generally lead to better outcomes. Positive outcomes may include improvements for the communities involved (Munro-Clarke 1992) as well as improved resource use and management practices or community-government relations (Buchy and Race 2001).

In light of the perceived benefits of public engagement, numerous step-by-step guides for community involvement have been developed over the years, spelling out the key ingredients for successful participation processes and formulating 'better' practice principles (e.g. Cullen 1977; IPP 1981; Renn et al. 1995; Davis 1996; Buchy et al. 1999; Tuler and Webler 1999; OCPI 2000; Buchy and Race 2001; Carson and Gelber 2001; McCool and Guthrie 2001). Common to guidelines for community engagement are recommendations concerned with the blurring (dispersal) of power and responsibility, and a shift away from government and passive compliance to stakeholder self-determination. The contemporary literature speaks of a widening of the basis of power and participatory deliberation based on open and collectively engaged decision-making.

It is also recognised that the formulaic operationalisation of 'better' practice protocols can yield counterproductive and often costly outcomes. Indeed, practitioners are being cautioned to take into account a range of contextual factors which may affect otherwise well-designed processes (Syme 1992; Buchy and Race 2001). In other words, process success is not only technique-dependent but also, perhaps predominantly, subject to context which includes historical, institutional and a range of social factors. Context in this regard also refers to the issue of governance and the very nature of the administrative workings of representative democracies. Governance forms a part of the wider context that affects the degree to which public participation can occur (see Buchy and Race 2001) and is therefore a critical element of successful community participation.

Governance, in broad terms, refers to all forms of producing and guiding social order (Börzel and Risse in press), describing the status of the relationships and interactions between governments and other social institutions (UNDP 1997a; Graham et al. 2003). This includes the processes and mechanisms through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences (UNDP 1997a). Contemporary debates in the governance literature are reflective of growing calls for stronger civil engagement in decision-making processes and more co-operative models in government-society relations (Mayntz 2004). Unsurprisingly, the better or fair engagement of the wider community in policy-making is increasingly regarded as a form of 'good' governance (Boedeltje and Cornips 2004).

Good governance is based on the core elements of democracy, which include access, accountability, transparency and responsiveness in political processes (Peterson and O'Toole Jr. 2001 cited in Thompson and Pforr 2005). As perceived by O'Riordan and Stoll-Kleemann (2002), good governance is a shared, systems thinking approach that embraces openness on issues such as leadership, problem specification, and process design. This form of governance is characterised by the collective negotiation of the basis for action along agreed process parameters. Collective deliberation is based on inclusion and openness, enabling the pooling of mental resources, ideals, and forms of knowledge. In short, good governance provides spaces in which open, reciprocal learning and network building can occur between governments and their citizenry, aiding collective capacity building and the negotiation of just and sustainable outcomes. It becomes apparent that active community input is an integral component of good governance, which at the same time is a prerequisite for meaningful public participation (UNDP 1997b; OECD 2001).

The shared, systems thinking governance approach forms the background against which WA's RFA process is assessed in this article. For the application of this governance approach to the case of the RFA, this article adopts a selection of 'good' process principles developed by McCool and Guthrie (2001), to be understood here as a measure of the operationalisation of good governance.

The principles include:

- accessibility of process

- power to influence process and outcomes

- accessibility of information

- structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions and facilitation of constructive personal behaviours

- adequate analysis.

The application of these principles for the purposes of this paper is described in more detail in the method section below.

## Comments on method

This paper is based on information derived from a broader, case study-based investigation into the Western Australian RFA (see Brueckner 2004). Case study data were obtained through a total of 59 interviews conducted over a three-year period between 1999 and 2001. Snowball sampling (see Goodman 1961; Babbie 1992) was used for the selection of a wide range of research participants, including state and federal politicians, RFA process managers, conservationists and timber workers as well as forest industry representatives, scientists, and members of the general public. The interview data were triangulated with RFA-related literature and media content for the purpose of corroborating RFA stakeholders' perceptions of the RFA process and its outcomes.

For the purposes of this study, a discourse-analytical approach (after Butteriss et al. 2001) was adopted, which builds on other work in the area of public policy development (e.g. Fischer and Forester 1993; Dryzek 1997; Meppem 2000). In search of discursive themes and patterns, visual coding and analytic deduction were used for the analysis of the interview data. The analysis occurred on the sentence level with the aims to: minimise author intervention and the risk of selectiveness; enable participants to tell their story; and to transfer openness and transparency to the reader.

Chosen data fragments were *partitioned* into word maps, also called *rhetorical landscapes* (Butteriss et al. 2001) or *environets* (Myerson and Rydin 1996), by way of identifying emerging themes and creating more manageable data categories. The partitioning of the interview data provided the basis for further questioning and analysis and allowed for the parenthetical presentation of the interview data. This was then complemented with, and compared to, data

derived from relevant RFA-related literature and media content.

The information provided below is a digest of themes pertaining to the participatory nature of WA's RFA process. The data presented are structured along a selection of the process principles developed by McCool and Guthrie (2001), described previously. The different perspectives of the RFA are presented in the form of a coherent meta-narrative: a synthesis of individual accounts of this policy process. Quotes selected from interview transcripts are shown in italics and inverted commas. Due to confidentiality constraints, however, individual RFA stakeholders are not identified, and only broad indications are given of stakeholders' backgrounds and affiliations.

The following, prior to the presentation of the RFA case study data, provides background information on Australia's national forest policy approach, which will help contextualise the forest conflict in WA and its culmination in WA's RFA process.

## Background to Western Australia's Regional Forest Agreement process

The forest conflict in WA mirrored an equally acerbic forest debate at the national level, which reached its zenith in the early 1990s. At the heart of the conflict were calls by conservationists for the reduction of the rate of commercial timber extraction, the cessation of woodchipping of native forests and an end to the practice of old growth forest logging. The timber industry, in contrast, was arguing for greater resource security and employment protection (Lane 1999; Stewart and Jones 2003). Out of this political crisis, a new national forest policy platform was born, which was to determine forest use and conservation in delineated forest areas around the country including WA.

The National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS; COA 1992) heralded a new approach to the conservation and development of Australia's native forests. The NFPS spoke of conflict resolution and certainty for all stakeholders via improved forest reserve systems, industry competitiveness and ecologically sustainable forest management practices. RFAs were meant to be the vehicles for the realisation of the new forest policy. They represented individual, 20-year agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, which sought to regulate native forest use, conservation and management.

Comprehensive Regional Assessments (CRAs) formed the basis for RFA negotiations between the

Commonwealth and state governments. These assessments were intended to coalesce new and existing information about the natural, cultural, economic and social values of the forest areas covered under RFAs (Coakes 1998). Data collection, integration and assessment were coordinated jointly by Commonwealth and state government agencies, bringing together for the first time a range of traditionally disparate policy portfolios e.g. the Forest Task Force of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Australia (former Department of Primary Industries and Energy) and Environment Australia (EA, former Department of Environment, Sport and Training, Australian Heritage Commission and Australian Nature Conservation Agency). This joint effort represented a new approach to inter-departmental collaboration (Coakes and Fenton 2001) and was regarded a significant advance in policy-making technique (Stewart and Jones 2003).

RFAs also incorporated a new approach to stakeholder participation. The RFA formula promised explicitly, in contrast to past policy processes, 'extensive public consultation' and to 'enable the community to make ... considered contribution[s] within the land use decision-making process and to forest management issues' (COA 1992, p. 38). Indeed, during WA's RFA process (1997-1999), the public was consulted through a wide range of mechanisms, including RFA-related research reports and information kits, an information line, a video and newsletters, fortnightly RFA updates published in the state's daily newspaper as well as local papers and a RFA internet website. In addition, three consultative reference groups were formed, community heritage workshops and public meetings were convened, and surveys and interviews were conducted as part of the RFA's social assessment component (see SAU 1998, 1999).[1, 2]

Despite these mechanisms, the participative nature of WA's RFA process was criticised by various RFA stakeholder groups. In fact, when WA's RFA was signed in May 1999, it triggered immense public hostility towards the outcomes reached. It was felt widely that the RFA document did not reflect the wishes of the community and that decision-makers were ignorant of the public's views towards forest use and protection. In response to public pressure, the WA Government repudiated the original RFA only eight weeks after the

agreement had been signed. Furthermore, at the state election in early 2001, the government lost office, arguably in part because of the public reaction to the RFA.

*In toto*, the forest conflict in WA had not been resolved by the RFA; instead, the venom in the forest debate was increased. Despite the rhetoric of conflict resolution and community involvement, the WA RFA seemingly failed to provide a process and to deliver outcomes that were acceptable to RFA stakeholders. This article takes issue with the notion of process failure as it relates to community engagement, and the case study data presented below will shed light on the reasons underlying the negative response to the WA RFA process and its outcomes.

## Stakeholder perceptions of the Regional Forest Agreement

### Accessibility of process

In relation to the accessibility of the RFA process, it was the level or quality of access that proved to be contentious. RFA stakeholders were invited to participate via public meetings, submissions, and what was called the Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG). The SRG was a consultative forum designed to advise the RFA Steering Committee, which was staffed with public servants from the WA and Commonwealth governments and in charge of overseeing the RFA process. Essentially, anyone – as a member of a registered organisation - could be signed up with the SRG, and individuals were free to attend public meetings. According to RFA process management, making available these participation options to members of the public meant that 'everybody [would get] a fair go'. However, the SRG was widely regarded as irrelevant to the process. This was because many stakeholders, especially environment groups, sought access to the actual decision-making process for they viewed the SRG as a mere 'Mickey Mouse Committee of everybody from the prospectors to anyone who was nominated'. As a consequence, many environment groups attempted to gain access to the RFA Steering Committee. Yet, when the state and Commonwealth governments 'formed the Steering Committee ...', it seemed that they 'left conservationists out of it', which in turn, meant that 'conservation groups boycotted the RFA process because they believed that they ought to have been on the Steering Committee itself'.

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1. For a detailed description of the WA RFA process, refer to Stewart and Jones (2003) or Worth (2004).

2. It was the first time that a national policy process of this kind incorporated social assessments. Yet, while social assessments formed a part of the WA RFA process, they fall outside a broader discussion on the participatory nature of RFAs. For an overview and critique of the social assessment component of the RFAs, see Coakes and Fenton (2001).

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Access in terms of timing, location and advertising of meetings was also reflected upon poorly. Many stakeholders felt that 'the publicity (given to meetings) was not good' and that 'there was inadequate lead-time given' because stakeholders 'would get notice at the last moment'. Although most public meetings were held in the state's south-west, many SRG meetings were held in the state capital, Perth. This inconvenienced many SRG members who were living in the southern parts of the RFA area; especially, in view of meetings being postponed or cancelled at short or – on occasion – no notice (e.g. 'there was no real effort, even though we as stakeholders had raised in the meetings that they needed to give at least one month notice for people to be able to put it in their diaries and arrange absence from work'; 'they would basically invite everyone up from the south-west for a key-stakeholders meeting and then 24 hours beforehand cancel it').

Complaints were also common about the perceived haste with which the process progressed as 'things were really rushed' and 'meetings were called ... at too short a notice'. This raised suspicion as to why the process was hurried and meant that 'people get very concerned ... (because they were) being rushed too much'. Moreover, the 'apparent rush and pressure on to get it all over and done with ... actually constrain(ed) the process' and in the eyes of many RFA stakeholders seemed to 'provide or legitimise the whole argument that we don't have time to have broad-scale community consultation'.

## Power to influence process and outcomes

The effectiveness of stakeholder input via the SRG was considered very limited in light of widespread perceptions that it was run by 'a government that (was) very much top-down' and therefore 'never going to be the actual place where major decisions were made'. In other words, the SRG was not believed to be a truly participatory or effective forum in terms of affecting process outcomes. In particular, local council and environmental group members felt that 'they did not have ownership of it' and that the whole process was 'a terrific example of disempowerment'. Their concerns were related to decision-making, being listened to, and having an impact on the final outcome. In this context, it was felt that 'it was always talk-down: You sit down, and we will tell you, and you listen', which in the view of many stakeholders explained in the end why 'the public rebelled against ... (the RFA) ... because they were not part of the decision-making process'. In contrast, process managers saw RFA stakeholder input as meaningful because in their view 'all issues raised (by stakeholders)

were considered and discussed'. Moreover, stakeholders were believed to have had an impact on the final RFA outcomes because government negotiators 'actually moved green (toward the conservation agenda) because of those people who actually did participate in the debate'.

During the public comment period when members of the public were asked to respond to the RFA Public Consultation Paper (COA and GWA 1998), more than 30,000 submissions were lodged with the authorities; an unprecedented number of public responses in WA. A large number of interest groups voiced their concerns about a range of process-related aspects as well as the choice of, and scientific basis for, reserve and forest use options proposed for adoption (e.g. Baile et al. 1998). The Consultation Paper was criticised for it was felt that 'there was little evidence of public input' into the forest conservation and management options presented, fuelling perceptions that the RFA was 'totally controlled ... by the timber industry'. Public agitation was aggravated further as 'there was no admission (by RFA management) that the vast majority of submissions on the RFA were opposed to what the RFA was suggesting'. Consequently, when the RFA was finalised by the Commonwealth and WA Governments in May 1999, many stakeholders saw in it a policy document that 'demonstrate(d) an incredible level of indifference towards community involvement and community participation and community concerns' (e.g. '... what you are saying to the community is: get stuffed, basically').

## Accessibility of information

In terms of access to published information, RFA process managers believed they had informed the public more than adequately since the 'information ... provided to the public, both the assessment information and all the other information, (was) much greater than you would have in most other government processes'. There were only admissions to occasional delays in the publication process (e.g. 'Some of the data did not get out as early as we would have liked but we made a choice that it was better to get out sufficient data rather than to get out something that was really half-baked earlier').

While stakeholders acknowledged that data were being made available, disquiet arose over the timing of data publication (e.g. 'The documentation was nowhere available until the last moment'), the type of information (e.g. '... the information that the Commonwealth officers had that might therefore be in the public domain was very, very tightly controlled as well and limited'), and the quality of the data (e.g. 'the public as a whole and other

institutions never really had an entry into the debate because of the quality of the information available to them'). Furthermore, there were questions about the data sources and the way information came together as 'the public did not get an opportunity to actually see how all of the information that came out of the working groups and the technical groups and the public comment on the options paper had been addressed until they were given a document, which says that it has been signed'. Among stakeholders, including industry representatives, there was a strong sense that data publication was poor, not just to the general public but to SRG members especially (e.g. '[Stakeholders] did not get proper access to information'; 'The Stakeholder Group ... [did] not have ... access to all of the information'). Similar concerns were raised in connection with the type of data that were made available. Stakeholders felt that the published information was of limited usefulness because of concerns about accuracy and the format in which it was presented (e.g. 'the material we had presented to us was very difficult for the layperson to understand because of gaps and imprecision in the materials'; 'After a session with these people you had to say that that is not right. Straight away you got a doubt about what the other information is like').

## Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions and facilitation of constructive personal behaviours

The words 'haste', 'marginalisation', 'battle', 'arrogance' and 'distrust' were used by a wide range of RFA stakeholders when describing the perceived structural (and here mainly behavioural) characteristics of the RFA process. Most stakeholders acknowledged a pervasive hostility in the debate, which was partly seen to be historical (e.g. 'No other environmental issue has caused so much conflict and divisiveness in the community as the forest issue in Australia's history'). The resulting angst and frustration was fuelled by the way stakeholders, SRG members in particular, felt treated throughout the process. It was held that stakeholders 'were basically just being insulted by this process'. In fact, stakeholders felt that 'the process was so perverted that ... (they) actually made a complaint to the Ombudsman, indicating that '(people) got angrier and angrier ... as the process went on'.

Perhaps most importantly, integral to the acrimonious nature of the RFA process was the Western Australian lead agency in the RFA process, namely the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) (e.g. 'there was distrust in WA about CALM's processes').

Since CALM's formation in 1985, there has been growing criticism of the department because of perceptions of a conflict of interest over its responsibilities for both forest production and conservation. In addition, controversy arose over allegations of departmental corruption and scientific censorship within the agency (Lowe 1993; Schultz 1993; Schoombee 1998; Churches 2000). This almost historical sense of distrust was echoed by RFA stakeholders who voiced 'concern that CALM were going to take the foreshadowed process and do the same thing to the process like they had done to a number of other processes to do with the forests'. Stakeholders' concerns, however, were also directly related to CALM's role in the RFA process, as it was seen to be the department that 'definitely dominated' and 'drove the process'. In particular, the 'methodology used by CALM - the way in which some of the CALM people managed themselves in public meetings' - was viewed, in part, to have been 'what discredited the RFA' in that it 'only served to ... heighten the distrust'. Overall, CALM's engagement with the community during the RFA process was seen to 'represent the absolute height of (the agency's) ability to not participate in the public debate'.

RFA process managers maintained that stakeholder meetings were 'civilised', perhaps 'regimented but fair'. Also, stakeholders conceded that both 'CALM staff and federal representatives ... (as well as) the state representatives were very professional'. Still, it was emphasised that there 'was no trust in the process' as people felt that they 'have been misled about things' and that it was a 'very unfair process'; and in particular, 'the level of distrust of CALM, whether it is warranted or not, was at such a high level' that the 'summary was a vote of no confidence in the RFA process'.

## Adequate analysis

It was part of the RFA rhetoric that the process was based on science, and both federal and state governments seemed to believe that 'science was always going to be the critical element in terms of what (the RFA) was going to achieve'. While it was accepted - in part quite cynically (e.g. 'science and scientists were used to validate a political process') - that many scientists were involved in the process, there was controversy relating to the actual number of scientists involved and who they were working for (e.g. 'there were a lot of scientists involved, 490 I think'; '500 scientists and experts ... let's have their names ... (they) came up with 220 and 89 per cent or 80 per cent of them work for CALM'). Here, the centrality of CALM proved divisive as there was a fairly high level of distrust in the public arena about whether CALM was

being totally open and whether the department was allowing its scientists to be totally open in their scientific findings (e.g. 'many forest biologists in WA were either employed by CALM and therefore not free to speak up or were at university and wimps and would not speak up'; 'It was all done in-house').

The interview data attest to considerable public uncertainty and doubt relating to the quality of scientific work undertaken for the Comprehensive Regional Assessment that formed the basis for the RFA negotiations. This was because of perceptions that 'figures (were) fudged and massaged', that 'some of the data was being chopped to pieces' and that 'the database (was) fundamentally flawed'; all amounting to the view that 'there was ... some incredibly shonky science' (e.g. 'there are not too many scientists who will say best science. They will say RFA science very disparagingly').

Concerns were also expressed by members of the scientific community regarding the scope and timelines given for the assessment work (e.g. 'there was no scope to go and acquire additional data which I think was fundamentally required'; 'the time aspect was utterly inadequate'), the review process (e.g. 'it was a higgledy-piggledy mess in terms of process, about how these reports were going to be dealt with, how they were going to be reviewed, how they were going to be assessed and handled'), and the quality of the scientific data sets used for the RFA process (e.g. 'conclusions are extremely suspect in the sense that they are based on inadequate data'; 'there was no real effort made to ensure that the outcomes from any scientific process, especially those processes that were done outside of CALM, were the best available').

While there was agreement that the resourcing of the scientific work was adequate (e.g. 'the funding was adequate') and an acknowledgement of some good scientific work by process participants (e.g. 'there was some good stuff (science) in the WA RFA'), a considerable number of process participants reached the conclusion that 'the involvement of the scientific community was an absolute farce', that 'at the end the scientific side was lost', and that 'this RFA process has not been about science.'

Whilst recognising the impact of time constraints (e.g. 'there are obvious limitations to what can be done within the timeframe'), RFA process management countered the above assertions, stating categorically that the RFA was 'a scientific process' and that the Comprehensive

Regional Assessment in WA '...was a very sound process'. Moreover, it was argued that 'the majority of ... (scientific) reports were actually peer-reviewed', that 'scientific data was being examined by Commonwealth and state governments before it was going to the Steering Committee, and (that) ... certainly quite a lot effort ... went into checking data'. Also, assurances were given that the 'assessment work was done in a very scientific manner' and that the science of WA's RFA 'put Western Australia in a very strong position in terms of protection of ... biodiversity' in the future. There was an admission that the science might have 'been lost in the debate', but it was stressed that 'it (was) there, that it (was) underlying'.[3]

## Discussion

The data presented above reveal a fairly dichotomous discourse environment with RFA stakeholders by and large demonising the process (e.g. 'the process was so perverted'; '(we were) massaged into believing that what the RFA was offering was the very best outcome') and both governments with their respective departments defending the process as having been appropriate (e.g. 'huge amount of public consultation'; 'We did our best to adapt that consultation to what people were saying they wanted it to be'). On the whole, RFA stakeholders generally felt poorly informed throughout the process, not listened to, marginalised, and excluded from the actual decision-making. Stakeholder responses signalled a lack of ownership and a distinct lack of trust.

Stakeholder discontentment with the RFA process and its outcomes can be explained in light of the government rhetoric employed prior to the commencement of WA's RFA process. Both the National Forest Policy Statement (COA 1992) and the WA Scoping Agreement (COA and WA 1996) spoke of active community engagement and involvement in the determination of policy direction. While the RFA process employed instruments of community consultation and communication, active participation was disallowed. It could therefore be argued that stakeholders were justified in thinking that the process did not deliver on its promises.

This form of limiting community involvement, however, appears to be common government practice, a point attested to by a senior public servant: '... consultation ... that could be just simply putting out a report to the public and receiving written submissions. I mean that's the minimum that would be required to meet the public

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3. For a more detailed analysis and critique of the science of the WA RFA, see Horwitz and Calver (1998) and Brueckner and Horwitz (2005).

consultation guidelines or the term public consultation.' Thus, it seems only consistent that stakeholder input was restricted to a Stakeholder Reference Group, public meetings, and invited public comments. In short, active stakeholder participation as understood within the context of good governance would have gone far beyond standard government procedure. The question arises, however, whether the decision to consult as opposed to enable active participation was adequate (prudent) given: (a) the widespread acknowledgment of the generally tokenistic nature of strictly consultative processes (Arnstein 1969); (b) the proven benefits of co-operation and active participation (e.g. Renn 1992; Laird 1993; Webler 1995; Moore 1996); (c) the promises made in the lead-up to WA's RFA (COA 1992; COA and WA 1996); and (d) the stakes in, and the context of, the (Western) Australian forest debate.

On the questions of success or failure, Buchy *et al.* (1999, p. 16) assert that 'it is impossible to answer categorically whether participation is successful or not as this judgement depends on the definition of 'success' and is very much linked to the purpose of participation in the first place'. The point here is that WA's RFA process was seemingly lacking precisely that definitional clarity or what Moore (1996) calls a 'shared understanding of success'. In other words, the evaluation of success was not negotiated between process managers and stakeholders. In general, RFA process management envisaged an 'instrumental' role for process participants while RFA stakeholders seemed to aspire to play an integral part in what they perceived to be a 'transformative' process, meaning an avenue to accomplish their particular ends founded on what they thought the process would deliver (after Buchy and Race 2001). Such transformative powers, however, were vested with process managers and political decision makers. In that regard, one can speak of process failure as process success *per se* was poorly defined, and its official definition was neither shared nor sufficiently communicated (e.g. 'the majority of the public wanted something significantly different to that set out by the RFAs to achieve'). This indicates that, in relation to community input, the objectives of the RFA against which its success can be measured were not widely understood or shared. It was these misperceptions that in the end only served to aggravate already existing tensions between process management and the RFA stakeholder community.

The case study findings suggest that public participation was insufficiently enabled when gauged in light of the process principles adopted for the purposes of this article.

In light of the interview data, a merely tokenistic role was permitted to RFA stakeholders throughout the process. A lack of transparency and information sharing, restrictive communication flows, and stakeholders' disconnectedness from the decision-making processes were shown to have been responsible for stakeholders' dissatisfaction with the RFA process. The interview data point toward the exclusion or marginalisation of stakeholders whose involvement was believed to have been constrained by decisions regarding, *inter alia*, problem specifications and process management as well as stakeholder consultation, the use of science and others. The separation of stakeholders from these aspects of the process precluded an interactive learning between RFA management and stakeholders and thus impaired adaptive planning and limited opportunities for transformational change. The problems associated with these limitations became evident in the stakeholders' reactions to the process and their rejection of the process outcomes. Overall, this communication failure meant that divergent expectations on the process could not be relayed effectively throughout the process, which in the end resulted in both sides of the process, seen in the RFA management-stakeholder dichotomy, blaming each other for not having understood what the process was about.

Although the rhetoric of the RFA gave the impression of empowerment and shared governance, the process was reflective of programmed governance, hierarchical in character and steered only in directions that the RFA decision-makers had control over. It represents an approach that O'Riordan and Stoll-Kleemann (2002) liken to the practical problem-solving paradigm, the governance model of the twentieth century. This governance model is based on exclusion and power concentration, it is short-termed and quick-fix orientated and prone to unintended consequences that give rise to complexity, uncertainty and injustice. It is resistant to stakeholder input, exhibiting a form of resilience to external change, as decisions on problem definition, process design or process leadership remain in the domain of a narrow policy community. This system does not facilitate or encourage the education of stakeholders but rather seeks to control information, resulting in an unhealthy relationship between the governing and the governed, as excessive control breeds distrust.

As was shown in the case of WA's RFA, trust is decisive in political processes and indeed a critical condition for good governance. As suggested by O'Riordan and Stoll-Kleemann (2002, p. 100), participants in political processes 'have to enter on the basis of trust in the processes in which they are operating, and in the spirit of

reaching an outcome that is fairly and respectfully arrived at'. It is trust that gives legitimacy to political processes, and it is therefore essential in public affairs and processes such as the RFA. However, this form of (active) trust has to be actively produced and negotiated (Giddens 1994). Active trust develops from a background level of trust culture dependent on a structural context (e.g. transparency of government processes) and so-called agential endowment (e.g. social moods and collective capital) (Sztompka 1999 cited in Marks and Zadoroznyj 2002). Thus, trust is evolutionary and requires time and process.

The WA RFA case study data attest that, in terms of both structural context and agential endowment, little scope existed for the development of trust among the negotiating parties. The decision-making structures of the RFA were closed, severely limiting stakeholders' ability to influence the process outcomes. Furthermore, a strong sense of distrust existed already prior to the commencement of WA's RFA process, adding to the difficulty of trust development. In other words, the absence of trust and the failure to engage in processes of active trust negotiation between RFA management and RFA stakeholders meant that the RFA was bound to face a legitimacy crisis due to a lack of public acceptabilty. This also leads to the conclusion that trust is the outcome of, and prerequisite for, good governance as it provides the platform for the meaningful engagement of the community in political processes. In contrast, the absence of trust is a characteristic of processes with constrained public participation and thus a key obstacle to good governance and enduring environmental policy-making.

## Concluding Comments

The case study data presented in this article point towards the failure of WA's RFA process. Stakeholders' perceived process realities illustrated that, despite the promising RFA rhetoric, WA's RFA process violated principles of good governance.

In light of the case study data and the literature reviewed, it can be suggested that environmental policy-making in Australia would benefit from the adoption of deliberation-based and open decision-making processes. Processes such as these would lead to a dispersal of power and responsibility and would aid the shift away from bureaucratic autocracy toward stakeholder self-determination. However, these transitions are unlikely to take place in the face of unchanged decision-making structures and entrenched power differentials. Any attempt to change traditional patterns of decision-making or entrenched structures of thought and governance,

ultimately relies on the relinquishment of power. Active participation and good governance are dependent on education and active enabling and assistance, fundamental to which is a genuine willingness of those who hold power for this to occur. Yet, as exemplified by WA's RFA, current political and bureaucratic structures derived from closed and opaque politico-economic entanglements seemingly prove too resilient to enable such a shift.

The application of good governance principles in this article helped identify the closed nature of WA's RFA process and explain its failure in terms of lacking social acceptability. The concept of good governance may therefore also prove to be a useful lens through which to plan and analyse future environmental policy processes in Australia. An approach such as this may help isolate process aspects prone to public rejection and thus reduce the potential for environmental policy conflicts.

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