Australia: Certified Forests - the end to Forest Conflict?

Will it ever be possible to resolve community conflict around natural resource management - particularly the logging of forests - in Australia?

I am undertaking a PhD to discover if this is the case, and have been getting some positive results so far, although my project is not yet finished. I am seeking to prove that conflict around logging can be resolved by developing a process to identify areas suitable for logging that is socially just (i.e. everybody who has a stake in the issue has the right to be involved), procedurally sound (in other words is a rigorous system of assessment, monitoring and verification) and is as close to environmentally sustainable as current knowledge allows (if you like, to deliver "ecological justice").

In order to deliver these three core elements (social, procedural and environmental justice) I have looked at a number of tools already out there in the marketplace of ideas. To deliver social justice, I have used a research approach called "participatory action research", which seeks to involve the community in the project, and to help and equip them to become active in the project. This approach is also based on continuous cycles of problem identification, evaluation and analysis. To deliver procedural justice, I have made use of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) system of independent, third party forest management certification. The FSC is an international independent body that accredits certifiers to assess forest management under its "principles and criteria for well-managed forests", and is driven by stakeholders (social, environmental or economic) – not government. To deliver environmental justice, I have selected a site (a monoculture Eucalyptus nitens plantation) that I am proposing be cleared over a two stage rotation and returned to native forest (this concept is known as "restoration forestry").

Having worked extensively with the community, environmental groups, government agencies and the FSC, I am in the process of undertaking logging trials to test which system of removing the plantation trees and replacing them with natural regeneration and special planting works best.

Once this has been tested, I hope to encourage plantation landowners across the landscape to take up the concept of having their properties assessed for conservation values and placed under protective covenant, and their plantations restored over a number of years back to native forest.

This has been a long and complicated process! If you want to know more, please visit: http://www.certifiedforests.org.au

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