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Porter, E. (2007) *Producing forests: a colonial genealogy of environmental planning in Victoria, Australia*. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26 (4). pp. 466-477. ISSN 0739-456X

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/25331/>

Deposited on: 25 June 2010

# **Producing Forests: A Colonial Genealogy of Environmental Planning in Victoria, Australia**

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## **Abstract**

In settler societies such as Australia, the colonial state actively produced its territory to secure it from its former Aboriginal owners. Imperial spatial technologies, including exploration, surveying, mapping, (re)naming, and classification of land and its potential uses, were the primary means of this activity. These were the early foundations of planning as a form of state-based action to secure the ordering of space, the production of knowledge about space, and the organizing of action within space. Through an examination of contemporary environmental planning and its historical roots, this article shows how planning practice continues to be structured by specifically colonial imaginings of place, which serve to continue the erasure of Aboriginal philosophies, knowledge, and relationships with place.

## **Introduction**

On a summer day in early 1997, bulldozers contracted by the Victorian state government entered the Nyah Forest, a tiny remnant of river-redgum woodland in northwestern Victoria. Their job was to widen the tracks to allow access for logging trucks due to start tree-felling operations shortly after. During this work, two Aboriginal burial sites belonging to the Wadi Wadi people (traditional owners of the Nyah Forest) were bulldozed and seriously damaged. In response, the then Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Inspector for the district (a Wadi Wadi person) placed an emergency declaration on the forest to halt the logging activity until a management plan could be put in place. Nyah Forest had long been earmarked for logging operations because it is classified as State Forest S2 in the zoning terminology of the government department responsible for managing the forest, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE). That designation within the planning hierarchy means "logging is an appropriate land use for the Nyah Forest" (Turnbull 1997). Proposals to log Nyah Forest had already brought widespread opposition from many local residents and particularly the Wadi Wadi people. The damage to the burial sites increased tensions between the traditional owners and the DNRE.

This conflict, which remains at a stalemate, can be read as a cultural one between two ways of perceiving, knowing, and relating to this place. Wadi Wadi people see Nyah Forest as a living, sentient being; an interconnected landscape of social history and cultural meaning; the resting ground of ancestral remains, and the home of ancestor spirits. Wadi Wadi people continue to care for the forest as they utilize resources, camp, hunt, and fish there and visit and protect the numerous burial mounds and other sacred parts of the forest. Thus, Nyah holds enormous sociocultural and economic meaning as well as cultural knowledge (for a more in-depth discussion of Wadi Wadi knowledge and sense of place in Nyah, see Porter 2004, 2006a). In briefly setting out here the meaning of Nyah Forest to Wadi Wadi people, I

am conscious of the great sensitivities regarding *country*<sup>1</sup> for Aboriginal people, and the continuation of a land claim that the Wadi Wadi people are pursuing. It is not my purpose here to present anthropological evidence of knowledge or use of Nyah Forest by Wadi Wadi or any other Aboriginal group but rather to represent the meaning of Nyah for Wadi Wadi people. I do so with grateful thanks to members of the Wadi Wadi community for sharing their interpretations with me and for permitting their publication. In planning terms, however, Nyah Forest is an area characterized by native hardwood trees of a particular width and height (see Commonwealth of Australia 1992). The definition of Nyah as a forest in these terms locates it very specifically in the hierarchy of protected area management in Victoria. This location is a determining factor in what can and cannot happen and by whom in Nyah. How did Nyah Forest become a forest? By what technologies and mechanisms of power did this designation come to powerfully shape the meaning and use of Nyah? In other words, how has Nyah come to be produced in this way, and what does that mean for the recognition of other ways of knowing Nyah Forest?

These questions are at the heart of this article, which, through using the case of Nyah Forest as an illustration, seeks to map the colonial roots of contemporary environmental planning in Victoria. The article is structured somewhat chronologically, whereby I begin with a summary of the colonial history of Victoria and the role of planning in producing place according to two sensibilities that dominated colonial relationships with nature—utility and beauty. I then return to the specific case of Nyah Forest and the contest over meaning and use between Aboriginal people and state-based planners to illustrate in detail how contemporary environmental planning practice continues to be powerfully shaped by those colonial sensibilities, with radical implications for Aboriginal people.

Before I commence that journey, however, there are a number of other statements that seem pertinent. I am by no means the first author (and it is hoped I will not be the last) to attempt to expose the radical limitations of modern planning practice and its deeply oppressive possibilities for certain social and cultural groups. Numerous critics and theorists have provided the fertile theoretical grounding for the findings that I present here (notably on planning, Sandercock 1998 and 2003; Friedmann 1973; and Healey 1997, and from wider theoretical pastures also Foucault 1972, 1980, and 1991; Young 1990; Hooper 1992; and Lefebvre 1991). More specifically to the research I present here, critiques of colonial practices, processes and sensibilities and their profound implications for the lifeways, cultures, and futures of colonized peoples also constitutes a well-established, if diverse, field of inquiry and theoretical endeavor. Again, I owe intellectual debts here to writers such as Said (1978 and 1995), Thomas (1994), and Jacobs (1996). There is a significant body of work that has investigated and theorized the particular (post)colonial situation of the developing world (see Scott 1998 for example) and instructively for this article, the power of culturally determined discourses of development (see Escobar 1995). Others have interrogated the “strategies, structures, and silences [that] transform the expert into a spokesperson for what appear as the forces of development” (Mitchell 2002,

15). Furthermore, a wealth of research has documented the specific ways that the use of science, through state management of natural resources, has resulted in widespread changes to and losses of customary rights and indigenous livelihoods around the world (see Scott 1998; Guha 1991; Bryant 1997; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). Guha (1991) in particular shows how “silvicultural strategies simultaneously exercise control over the customary use of the forest and enable the reproduction of favored species of trees” (49). This article adds to this body of work.

My purpose here is not to rehearse these various arguments, although they remain at the heart of my endeavor. Instead, I focus on tracing and mapping the colonial roots of a particular “moment” of planning practice. This moment, for me, is the ordering, knowing, and utilization of a tiny forest called Nyah, in northwestern Victoria, Australia. As one small story, it connects us elsewhere to geographically diverse but similarly constructed moments such as those discussed by Guha (1991) and others and to wider conceptual work in planning theory, postcolonial studies, indigenous studies, environmental studies, and the intersections between them. In detailing the very minute specifics of this story and its connection with times past, I hope to show how planning remains deeply embedded in pervasive colonizing practices, the implications of this, and the possibilities for action and response. Understanding planning as a practice shaped by colonial relationships and historical specificities is crucially important work for the theory and practice of planning in (post)colonial settings (see also Porter 2006b).

This means that other (post)colonial planning moments require similar kinds of analytical treatment to unlock their own historical and sociocultural specificities. My claim here is not about planning practice in its entirety if such a thing were even possible to identify. Following Foucault, my concern centers on fairly mundane specifics operating in particular times and places—in other words, one story rooted in a unique set of historical, spatial, and sociocultural intersections. There are many different plannings, utilizing a different variety of material technologies and discursive practices. Elsewhere, I have looked at a variety of kinds of planning practice (Porter 2006b) and teased out their theoretical implications. My aim here is quite specific: I want to explore the colonial genealogy of one particular moment of planning practice, as a beginning to the work of decolonizing planning.

### **Cartography and Violence: Producing the Colony of Victoria**

In 1834, the Henty brothers sailed from Van Diemen’s Land (now the state of Tasmania) along the southwestern coast of what is now the state of Victoria. The Hentys had been dissatisfied with their grant of land in Van Diemen’s Land and without waiting for official approval from the Colonial Office (Kiddle 1961; Broome 1984), squatted on lands on the mainland, thus constituting the first permanent occupation of the southeastern mainland by European settlers. Six months after the arrival of the Hentys, John Batman, along with other venture capitalists also dissatisfied with the availability of lands in Van Diemen’s Land, sailed around Port Phillip Bay with an eye to settle. Batman negotiated his infamous “treaty” with the Wurundjeri people, offering them

blankets and trinkets in trade for their lands around the Bay (see Broome 1984). Batman and Henty were breaking British law, being squatters on land not officially sanctioned by the British government. By the time Governor Bourke came to investigate the illegal settlements in 1836, he discovered over 170 settlers and 26,000 sheep already in the district and had no choice but to officially sanction the settlement (Kiddle 1961; Broome 1984). Thus, the colony of Port Phillip was officially established. In 1851, the colony became independently governed by administrative separation from New South Wales and was thereafter known as Victoria (Archer 1861; Christie 1979).

During this time, Major Thomas Mitchell, a Scottish-born explorer and then surveyor-general of New South Wales, extended his surveying and mapping expedition into the new colony. In his reports, Mitchell waxed lyrical about the excellence of lands particularly in the western district, which he described as “short, open and available in its present state, for all the purposes of civilized men” (Mitchell quoted in Kiddle 1961, 15). Mitchell’s writings brought a wave of settlers to establish pastoral runs in this rich agricultural country. Victoria’s colonial masters, reinforced by Mitchell’s acclamations, had also begun to see the great value of the natural resources afforded by the lands and waters of the colony. In celebration of their independence from New South Wales, the first Victorian Exhibition was held in 1851 to display the colony’s various agricultural and industrial products. By the time of the second Victorian Exhibition ten years later, the exhibition secretary proudly reported that the colony had progressed, because the vast majority of the exhibits were now of local produce and indigenous raw materials as opposed to the wholly imported displays that had dominated the 1851 exhibition. This, he declared, showed the “immense amount of rough work perform[ed], in order to render the country habitable, passable, and capable of affording us sustenance” (Archer 1861, 4).

In his opening address to the 1861 Victorian Exhibition, the president of the Exhibition Commission, Sir Redmond Barry, noted that the collection of indigenous timber displayed illustrated “the resources which we possess in the forests of the interior, as well as in those which clothe the seaboard, ready to become available for domestic use and for export when rendered easy of access by improved means of communication” (Archer 1861, 23). Timbers were classified according to a scientific taxonomy by the colonial botanist Dr Ferdinand von Mueller and were judged according to merits of “utility, beauty, perfection, facility of attainment or production, cheapness, and universal adaptation to all markets, or a special fitness to meet a particular want” (Archer 1861, 10). Forest resources in the colony were deemed “valuable for their timber, their barks, their secretions of resins and gum resins, and for the abundant essential oils” (Archer 1861, 12), the colony being entirely reliant on timber as both fuel and building material. The governor of Victoria thus confidently announced as a result of the productive activity on display at the 1861 exhibition, that the colony was making “steady progress, and advances day by day towards a higher stage of material prosperity” (Archer 1861, 33).

The improvement of the colony, as outlined above, was wholly predicated on the drawing of territory into the productive capacities of colonial capitalism,

primarily for agricultural purposes. Much of the produce would feed the European residents of the colony, with the hope that export value could soon be derived. Colonial capitalism rendered Victoria a space containing natural features and resources able to be “demarcated, parceled out, commodified, and purchased, not for its intrinsic but potential value for speculative purposes” (Yeoh 1996, 282). Space and its control were thus fundamentally linked to the accumulation of wealth, power, and the continued potential for capitalist expansion (Harvey 1989). Utility was consequently the primary means by which value and “meaning” was assigned to a place.

All of this frenetic activity of surveying, selecting, fencing, and farming land in Victoria occurred, however, amid fierce opposition from the Aboriginal peoples whose country was inexorably being drawn into this colonial, capitalist web. From the time the Hentys arrived in Portland Bay, Aboriginal people in Victoria fiercely resisted the occupation of their country. This was particularly prevalent in the western district of Victoria, where the virtues of the territory for pastoral uses combined to mark the first years of European settlement as vicious and bloody as the frontier followed the lines of pastoral settlement (see Christie 1979; Critchett 1990; Clark 1995, 1998). Yet wholesale dispossession of Aboriginal people from their country was required for the colony’s success. An Aboriginal presence dramatically unsettled the settlement process, and a wide variety of means were employed by both settlers and the colonial state in an attempt to eradicate that presence.

Establishment of towns became a widely used military strategy to wrest territories from Aboriginal control and occupation. Townships afforded protection to Europeans by the proximity of assistance from neighbors and allowed easy policing and patrol of town boundaries to restrict the movement of Aboriginal people (Pennay 2001, 15). Townships fundamentally interrupted Aboriginal food sources, communications, and social landscapes. Fences, as the key means of selecting lands for occupation, were erected based on surveys. Towns and fences thus literally enclosed and settled the territory (Priestley 1984, 92). By 1850, Aboriginal resistance had been broken in most parts of Victoria as disease, violence, state-sponsored repression, and the depletion of food sources combined to decimate Aboriginal populations (see Christie 1979; Critchett 1990; Clark 1995, 1998). Policies of assimilation and the physical removal of Aboriginal people to centralized and controlled environments on government-run stations completed the material dispossession of country from Aboriginal ownership (see for example Critchett 1980).

The colonial history of Victoria that I have briefly sketched here shows the manifold violent, material, and discursive strategies that secured or at least attempted to secure the appropriation of territory. Mitchell’s surveying and mapping of the territory of Port Phillip colony marked the beginning of the production of colonial space in Victoria by rendering space intelligible to the colonial gaze through “exploration epistemologies” (Jackson 1998, 57). These included surveying, cadastral mapping, the (re)naming of natural features and places (see in particular Carter 1987), and the scientific study and categorization of flora and fauna species (which at that time tended to include

Aboriginal peoples as a category of fauna). As land was drawn into the colonial domain through surveying and mapping, it was consequently categorized and valued for its potential use. This valuation enabled selection of plots and settlement, thus bringing the land and natural resources into European use. The demarcation of country through the erection of fences, the drawing of colony boundaries, the building of towns, and the laying of roads consolidated the ordering of places in colonial terms and for colonial use.

The production of colonial space required a mastery of space and its components so defined through the efforts of colonial enterprise (fence and town building, land clearing, stock production, and the introduction of European birdcalls). Space was given order through scientific observation, assigned value according to a set of predetermined characteristics, and thus brought under control. Mastering nature in this way was predicated on producing knowledge about nature (see Said 1978; Griffiths 1996). As positivist science and its philosophical underpinnings dominated European thinking at that time, nature became stabilized as an object of knowledge through a variety of scientific disciplines, such as natural history, botany, ecological science, and zoology. They authorized how nature could be identified and known. This occurred through an abstraction of components of nature that themselves could be classified as natural resources according to their utilitarian value (Scott 1998, 13). To question nature knowledge in this way is to demonstrate how knowledge is not itself a foreclosure on universal truths about natural places but instead an effect of power (Braun and Wainwright 2001, 41; drawing from Foucault 1980). Production and presentation of knowledge about frontier spaces and places by explorers were, then, practices of power. The manner in which settlers, explorers, and the colonial state came to see, know, categorize, and describe places and people was fundamentally a part of establishing a more systematic geography of knowledge about the Australian continent (see Carter 1987; During 1991; Jackson 1998). Defining, knowing, and acting on place constituted a triad of statecrafts enacted to produce colonial space in Victoria.

### **The Role of Planning**

As a distinct profession, planning did not exist, of course, until well into the nineteenth century. But the methods of statecraft (following Scott 1998), by which we now define state-based planning practice, were the mechanisms by which Victoria was produced as a colonial (non-Aboriginal) place. Three specific strategies (both material and discursive in their production and effect) were employed to secure the domination of place in Victoria:

1. Naming and boundary definition—defining and ordering space
2. Surveying and mapping—the production of knowledge about space.
3. Selection and zoning—assigning value to space for active use.

Planning as the central place-producing and regulatory activity of the state is thus shown to be one of colonialism's earliest and most pervasive dispossession strategies. Each of these statecrafts, as argued in this article, remains at the heart of contemporary planning practice, and thus the actual practices and technologies of planning are seen as not only derived from

colonially rooted cultural perceptions of place but constitute how the state continues its (post)colonial “struggle for control over territory” (Said 1995, 332) in Victoria. As Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) show, such internal territorialization of states is one of the ways by which states control and order populations and activities. In this section, I trace the roots of contemporary environmental planning practices back to colonial sensibilities about nature to demonstrate this colonial genealogy of planning.

Town planning emerged as a formal movement in Victoria in 1914 with the establishment of the Town Planning Association, an amalgamation of the Anti-Slum Committee and the National Parks Association (Sandercock 1976; Freestone and Grubb 1995). Here, the influence of the nineteenth-century urban reform movement is evident, alongside an emerging conservation and nature “ethic.” In nineteenth-century Victoria, nature conservation was a topic of frequent discussion, especially in intellectual circles such as Melbourne’s Kalizoic Society (Bonyhady 2000). Conversations about nature were strongly influenced by the publication of George Perkins Marsh’s seminal book *Man and Nature*, which called for a restoration of balance within human-nature relationships (Hall 1992; Powell 1993). Marsh’s book was steeped in the romantic tradition—the production of a pristine, original nature imagined as the existential touchstone of human society, something to which we should all desire to ‘return’ from the pollution of modern (urban) life. It called up notions from Rousseau’s dream to return civilization to its ‘savage’ roots and imagined nature in the sublime ethos as a place for spiritual renewal (Rousseau 1751; Kain 1981).

Early colonial governors had also been concerned with the preservation of water catchments, forest resources, and the impact of development on sensitive areas (see Hall 1992; Mayne-Wilson 1993; Bonyhady 2000). In Victoria, the early colonial environmental sensibility was encouraged by key public servants such as Surveyor-General Major Thomas Mitchell and the Victorian Government Botanist Ferdinand von Mueller, both very influential men. Mitchell, for example, was fiercely opposed to the imperial preference for straight lines, arguing that surveying should pay more deference to local topographical and natural features. Mueller became an early champion of forest conservation based on aesthetic, ecological, and utilitarian grounds (Powell 1993). This thinking derived from a European “planetary consciousness” that was developing as the scientific community became increasingly interested in classifying the elements of the natural world. Thus, an emerging romantic sensibility (along with utility) also powerfully influenced the value and meaning associated with place.

Clear felling of native forests for agricultural expansion had been the source of considerable public concern such that in 1867, the colonial government declared nearly 116,000 acres of land as state forest and timber reserve. Cutting was banned to encourage regrowth, but this affected only 8,500 acres of that reserve (Woodgate and Black 1988), and a lack of forestry inspectors meant that large-scale clearing continued to take place throughout the latter half of the 1800s (Priestley 1984). By 1897, public concern was running so high that a royal commission was established to examine forestry practices.



The commission's recommendations were eventually enshrined in the Forests Act 1907 (Vic), which established Victoria's first Forests Department to manage public lands and in particular clear felling (Woodgate and Black 1988). Prominent bush-walking clubs, the Field Naturalists Club, and the Town Planning Association had also successfully lobbied for nature conservation, resulting in the declaration of Victoria's first national park at Tower Hill in 1892

Utilitarian and romantic traditions (and the tensions that exist between them) thus constitute two powerful European philosophies about space. Conflicts between utilitarian and romantic conceptions of place had thus begun to generate a distinct hierarchy of space. Most important, those values remain enshrined in the contemporary hierarchy of land use. The next section looks at the contemporary practice of environmental planning in Victoria (within its [inter]national context) and goes on to examine the production of Nyah Forest to illustrate.

### **Protected Areas and Contemporary Environmental Planning**

The Australian National Reserve is a system of parks, reserves, and forests allocated, defined, and managed by the state that collectively have come to be known as "protected areas." The frameworks that govern the National Reserve are influenced by the World Conservation Union (hereafter the IUCN), which defines a protected area as "an area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means" (IUCN 1994, 2). It also establishes a system of protected areas and their management based on the following categories (IUCN 1994):

Ia Strict Nature Reserve – for science

Ib Wilderness Area – for wilderness protection

II National Park – for ecosystem protection and recreation

III Natural Monument – for conservation of specific natural features

IV Habitat/Species Management Area – for specific habitat

V Protected Landscape/Seascape – for conservation and recreation

VI Managed Resource Protected Area – for sustainable use of natural ecosystem

This system of classification was not established as a hierarchy in the sense that category VI areas are valued less or more than category I areas. Nevertheless, the system enshrines assumptions about human involvement in place. In doing so, it provides the basis for zoning and regulation of protected areas on a classification of place that continues to be structured along a continuum suspended between the two poles of utility and beauty. At one end are places venerated for their sublime landscapes and intact ecologies (for example, wilderness areas). These are places worth protecting, usually with minimal human intervention, because they already display the least impact of human development and represent 'untouched nature'. An important body of literature has documented how the colonial production of wilderness is an inherently Eurocentric idea that was a powerful tool used to dispossess

indigenous peoples (see Cronon 1995; Langton 1996; Stevens 1997). In relation to Australia, Griffiths (1996) observes that this colonial production of wild nature “preserves or restores landscapes as Europeans supposedly found them—and as Aborigines made them—and it calls them untouched, pristine. Aborigines are thereby rendered invisible as agents in the landscape” (263). Through this designation of “romantic” nature circulates a range of colonial tropes, discursive practices and material technologies that seek to map and reconstitute those places. “Untouched nature” represents an existential touchstone of original purity, and the production (and preservation) of such places offers the opportunity to “return” to a state of being more “in tune” with nature.

At the other end of the spectrum are places valued for their natural resources (for example, the Managed Resource Protected Area of the IUCN’s definition above). In Australia, state forests (such as Nyah) occupy this position. Management objectives for state forests are focused on extracting economic value from their resource base on a sustainable basis. State forests, then, represent natural but radically modified landscapes whose features, as a result, have primarily economic value. Here, economic development, the market, and the public interest are simultaneously invoked to legitimate the state’s utility of territory. These practices and technologies underpin the production of place/s deemed valuable for their natural resources, erasing indigenous ways of knowing in favor of a technical classification of the national (economic) interest (see Willems-Braun 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Producing both utilitarian or romantic natural places call on the same range of discursive practices and material technologies. Three statecrafts, as outlined earlier, are operating to this end:

1. Production of place through its definition and ordering
2. Production of knowledge about place
3. Production of appropriate and meaningful action in place

Changes to legislation and land use practices that protect natural areas and enshrine environmental principles such as sustainability at their core are to be welcomed. My purpose here is not to undermine these efforts. Rather, I am concerned with how these mechanisms construct and codify space. I look at each of these three statecrafts in the following sections and draw on the specific example of Nyah Forest to illustrate their power and effects.

### **Producing Forests**

State forests are areas of public land with predominantly natural features that produce material goods from their natural resources. The commonwealth government’s policy defines a “forest” as “an area, incorporating all living and non-living components, that is dominated by trees having usually a single stem and a mature or potentially mature stand height exceeding 2 metres and with existing or potential crown cover of overstorey strata about equal to or greater than 20%” (Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1998, 3). In other words, a forest is defined by the shape and size of its trees.

The discursive move in defining places as forests is one implicated within the commercial imperative of timber production. Timber production contributes approximately A\$10 billion per annum to the Australian economy (2.5 percent of national GDP) and provides 82,500 jobs nationally (Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1998). In Victoria, timber harvesting constitutes 8 percent of all manufacturing activity and provides 30,000 jobs (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 1996). Timber harvesting from public lands in Victoria is only permissible in state forests (a considerable percentage of timber produced in Victoria comes from privately owned forests). In total, after exclusionary zones are removed, approximately 14 percent of public land in Victoria is available for timber production.

Nyah Forest is classified as a state forest (S2), thus placing it specifically within this overarching regulatory framework. Land use and management in Nyah is framed by the two competing interests of commercial timber production (utility) and nature conservation (beauty). The key strategic planning document governing Nyah's management is DNRE's Proposed Management Strategy for the Floodplain State Forest of the Mildura Forest Management Area (hereafter the Strategy). The Strategy focuses on productive forest uses in the planning area, of which Nyah is a small part. The Strategy notes that "forests of this area provide a diverse range of natural and cultural values, and make an important contribution to the local economies through timber production, public land grazing and tourism" (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000b, 1).

Approximately 2,300 hectares of the forest management area (FMA) is zoned available for redgum timber production, just under 10 percent of the total floodplain state forest estate (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 13). In Nyah Forest itself, approximately 600 hectares is available for timber production. In the overall timber production context, then, Nyah is quite important, constituting almost a quarter of the available redgum in the state forests of this FMA. Thus, Nyah is known in planning terms predominantly for its hardwood timber production value, considered both appropriate and desirable objectives in the Victorian public's interest.

### **Producing Knowledge about Forests**

Nature counts in state-based planning terms when it can be made "legible" (following Scott 1998) to the state's classificatory structures. Each of the documents discussed above and the numerous others that constitute the protected area regulatory framework in Victoria are underpinned by knowledge that seeks to simplify nature and render it legible for state intervention. A Statewide Forest Resource Inventory (SFRI) has been undertaken in Victoria since 1994, following the implementation of a national inventory. According to DNRE, the SFRI is a tool for forecasting sustainable forest yield, mapping old growth forests, and is a "process of keeping stock of what you own" (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003b). To take stock of forests, scientists use aerial photographs and remote sensing to measure where forests are in the Victorian landscape. Known as "stand mapping", it is "the art and science of examining . . . similarities and grouping the trees

together in a logical and consistent manner” (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003b). In this way, the SFRI becomes a key tool that actively produces the forest estate in Victoria.

Nyah is similarly known to state-based planning through this lens of Western scientific discourse. It becomes part of the forest estate because of its physical characteristics, as measured by the methods of positivist science through stand mapping and stock taking. Furthermore, a range of disciplines informs the planning decisions that determine management action in Nyah. Table 1 draws evidence directly from the various planning documents that govern Nyah to illustrate.

Furthermore, management decisions are made legitimate by how steeped they are in scientific information. For example, in its final report on the Mallee region around Nyah, the Land Conservation Council

recognized that it required a comprehensive study of the vegetation and fauna on public land, to provide an objective base for future land-use decisions. The Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands undertook a major study to determine the nature and location of the plant communities on public land in the Mallee area and to prepare a floristic map of the region. Interpretation of aerial photographs and Landsat images were [sic] undertaken as well as a coordinated sampling of the vegetation types by botanists and analysis of the information to determine the vegetation communities. (1989, 3)

Knowledge produced through the canons of Western science is of course highly valued in the state-based planning domain. This is not to undermine the inherent usefulness of such knowledge and its critical importance in underpinning sound environmental policy. My point is that such knowledge is positioned as objective, value-free, and neutral to political, social, or cultural influences and thus is of greater value in the “knowledge stakes” than any other kind of knowledge. Furthermore, the planner or policy maker comes to be seen as a professional expert—a person trained in the knowledge disciplines required to make objective, rational planning decisions. As experts backed by the authority of the state, planners become powerful in shaping attention to planning problems and determining the parameters of the possible (Forester 1989; Zanetti 1998; Mitchell 2002).

Table 1: Western scientific knowledge base in Nyah

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Nyah</b>
Ecology and biology	'806 vascular plant species in the floodplain of the MFMA and ... 401 mammal species, 282 birds ... 53 reptiles, 11 amphibians, 10 fish and 1 invertebrate (some exotic, but mostly native)' (University of Ballarat 1997, 16)
Cartography	'complete pre-1750 mapping of ecological vegetation classes for the FMA and review representation of current ecological vegetation classes as a proportion of pre-1750 extent' (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 3).
Ornithology	'Identify Regent Parrot nest trees and in consultation with DNRE biologists assess the distribution and abundance of other nest trees in the vicinity' (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 9).
Silviculture	'...maintain productivity of forest stands through regular monitoring of regeneration and through the application of silvicultural techniques including thinning and removal of overwood' (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 15)
Hydrology	'Environmental water along the Murray River floodplain is derived from regulated allocations, rain-rejection flows and unseasonable rain' (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 11).
Zoology	'The Inland Carpet Python is a slow-moving, nocturnal

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snake that has an average adult length of 170 to 190cm ... ’

(Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003a, 1)

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Archaeology ‘...the most prevalent site types in the study area are mounds, followed by scarred trees and occasional midden exposures and burials’ (Cusack 2000, 14).

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### **Organizing Planning Action in Forests**

Determining what is natural and how we know it as natural underpins the possibilities for environmental planning action. What is “conservation” action and what is “degrading” action? How are different kinds of inter/actions with nature defined and judged? Here, I address decision making for action in forests—Nyah in particular—to illustrate how the state organizes and defines appropriate action within and on place.

Timber harvesting or logging is a controversial issue in Victoria. Controversy centers on the environmental sustain-ability of harvesting native Australian timber, much of which is hardwood, and takes a very long time to grow. A major review of timber harvesting in state forests undertaken by the Victorian government in 2002 found that Victoria’s timber resource could be exhausted by as early as 2011 if current practices continued. State forests are now managed to achieve a range of objectives, including ‘conservation of flora and fauna’ at the same time as ‘provision of timber and other forest products’ (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003b). How is this intractable tension managed?

Sustainability (particularly environmentally sustainable development or ESD) is the central technique now employed by the state to balance forestry interests with conservation concerns. This allows “pressures for change [to] be identified and accommodated so as to ensure that the Australian community derives optimal benefit from its forests and forest resources” (Commonwealth of Australia 1992, 2). My purpose here is not to undermine this crucial principle but to highlight how mechanisms such as this exemplify a form of decision making that contributes to how the state produces action within and on space.

The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment defines ESD as a form of “proper resource accounting” (Council of Australian Governments 1992), which can account for environmental and economic considerations as well as the interests of current and future generations. What is implied by this codification of resource accounting? “Proper” implies objectivity (in the sense of appropriate), efficiency of measurement (in the sense of right), and standardization (in the sense of useful and meaningful). The “resource” in this definition of ESD is that bundle of natural properties that have a value to

society by virtue of their properties. Nature, then, can be categorized into discrete components (trees, water, air, and animals), each of which has a particular value, be it utilitarian or romantic. Finally, “accounting” is that form of standardized measurement that counts and in so doing orders objects. It is a specialized practice, one undertaken by those trained in its measurement techniques. Thus, ESD is a statecraft (following Scott 1998), a method of rendering natural places “legible” (following Scott 1998) to modern bureaucratic administration by radically simplifying and then assigning value to physical features for their use. The means of doing this are undertaken by professionals—expert planners, for example—trained in the specific techniques of resource accounting. Forests themselves are thus produced to balance the competing public interests of commercial forestry, providing economic wealth and employment (utility), and nature conservation, providing citizens with respite and solitude with nature (romance).

State-based action in Nyah Forest also relies on this balancing act. For example, timber harvesting is considered by the senior forester in charge of forestry operations in the region as “good for forest management” (see note 3). Common forestry practice requires field staff to select stands of trees that are overcrowded, where the trees look “a bit sick.” By “thinning” these areas (the product of which would be used for domestic firewood sales), it is argued that the health of the forest is improved, because the canopy is opened and individual trees receive more light. The fire risk is also reduced, because much of the forest debris is removed. DNRE’s forest manager for the region also describes thinning operations in these terms. He states that

thinning happens by itself, and the dead wood that’s there is the result of the bigger dominant trees taking over ...and it just closes the canopy off [and stunts tree growth] . . . So, from the commercial timber harvesting point of view ...the commercial guys are looking for a tree that’s nice and big and straight so they can use it back at the sawmill.<sup>3</sup>

Thinning, then, is a management technique that speeds up a natural process and in so doing renders a forest more appropriate for timber harvesting and economic utilization.

Decision-actions committed to by state-based planners in this instance are positioned as a technical backdrop to contested relations between different groups over legitimate uses and activities within Nyah. But planners—their knowledge, values, and actions—do not operate as neutral background but instead actively construct the possibilities for action in Nyah Forest. The environmental planning canon has constructed Nyah as a particular kind of place by virtue of its zoning as S2, which designates Nyah as available for timber harvesting. It is this discursive event that powerfully determines how Nyah Forest is known and valued in state-based planning terms or, to use Scott’s (1998) words, how the state “sees” Nyah Forest. Furthermore, planning actions concerning Nyah rationalize its designation as available for timber harvesting. As the next section will demonstrate, other values or ways of seeing Nyah are overshadowed by the desire of the state to commercially utilize Nyah’s timber.

## **Implications for Aboriginal People**

Production of forests in this way is rooted within a colonial view of what constitutes natural places, how they are to be known as natural, and therefore how to act on and within them. Contemporary place philosophies and approaches that underpin today's planning and management techniques are practices that continue the work of early colonial times in Victoria. The conflict outlined here between Wadi Wadi people and the state over logging in Nyah Forest continues a struggle about the meaning, value, and use of place that began with colonial invasion. State-based attempts (via planning technologies) to produce place by means of ordering, knowing, and acting on it according to the sensibilities and philosophies of its own culture is a continued attempt to produce place in (post)colonial Victoria and render Aboriginal presence in place invisible.

Yet this is not to say that such an Aboriginal presence is in fact invisible. On the contrary, Aboriginal people have waged ongoing campaigns for the return of lands, their increased involvement in land management, their rights with respect to cultural heritage protection, and the recognition of their own specific knowledge bases (for more information on the Aboriginal struggle, see Bandler 1989; Broome 1982; Carroll 1983; Toyne and Vachon 1983; Hawke and Gallagher 1989; Howitt, Connell and Hirsch 1996; Jacobs 1988; Gibson 1999; Atkinson 2002). Consequently, many hard-won gains have been made that have substantially shifted the position of indigenous people in Australia with regard to land use and management, particularly in the context of protected areas. Joint management of national parks, for example, is now a reality for Aboriginal traditional owners in many areas of Australia (see Smyth 2001 for an overview and also Craig 1992; Lawrence 2002; Davies, Josif, and Williams 2000; Birckhead, De Lacy, and Smith 1992; De Lacy and Lawson 1997). More recently, indigenous protected areas have been established through negotiation between indigenous people and the state, and they now form part of the IUCN categories for management and protection (see Szabo and Smyth 2003). Elsewhere, different models of shared management or ownership regimes of protected areas are also emerging (see contributions to Jaireth and Smyth 2003). The recognition of native title in Australia through the High Court's famous Mabo decision and the passage of the Native Title Act 1993 (Cwth) has afforded some traditional owner groups recognition of their continuing ownership of, rights to, and responsibility for their country.

Shifting ground in relation to Aboriginal interests and rights has also occurred in regard to Nyah Forest. This is predominantly because the question of logging in Nyah Forest has been a controversial issue in the region for many years. Much of that dispute centers on what Wadi Wadi (and other Aboriginal people) perceive as a lack of proper attention to matters of cultural heritage and a proper valuing of Nyah Forest in cultural terms. Wadi Wadi people accuse forest managers of being slow to act to protect cultural heritage properly and perceive attempts at "consultation" to have been halfhearted in the least and at times downright manipulative of existing community divisions (for further intricacies of this story, see Porter 2006a).



That a Wadi Wadi person was able to bring a halt to logging activity in the forest is testament to the power able to be exercised by some Aboriginal people through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 (Cth), although very recently this legislation has been replaced to significantly water down such rights (see also Porter 2006a). Furthermore, Aboriginal interests do feature in the Nyah planning framework. In relation to timber harvesting specifically, the Strategy proposes to “consult with Aboriginal people and organizations in the annual process of developing and revising Wood Utilisation Plans” and continue to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage sites (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2000a, 21). All of these represent significant gains for indigenous people generally and Wadi Wadi people in particular.

Yet deep-rooted problems remain. In the case of Nyah Forest, DNRE is able to fulfill its legislative compliance (in terms of native title and cultural heritage regimes) without requiring a fundamental shift in its own production of activities within Nyah Forest. Ordering Nyah within a hierarchy of protected area places and defining it as “available for timber harvesting” fundamentally determines the kinds of conversations that can be had between the state and Wadi Wadi people about Nyah. Valuing Nyah for its discrete sets of natural components (trees, birds, water, and soil) values a particular kind of knowledge about Nyah. Alternative knowledges about Nyah as a Wadi Wadi place are silenced. Action within Nyah is organized toward the “appropriate use” of these natural utilities in ways that deny how those actions disempower Aboriginal rights and interests and undermine other sensibilities and relationships to place.

The continued production of Nyah Forest as a forest (available for timber harvesting according to its use class) through planning’s technologies of knowledge production, boundary delineation, and the scientific categorization of things in Nyah Forest thus constitutes a continuity of colonial power and domination over Aboriginal interests. Defining what is a natural place, how we know it as natural, and how it is to be acted on powerfully shapes the visibility or otherwise of an Aboriginal presence in and responsibility for place. Planning remains a colonial practice.

### **Conclusion: Why Is Planning Still a Colonial Practice?**

This article has attempted to construct a colonial genealogy of contemporary environmental planning practice in Victoria, Australia. It has traced the historical roots of planning as a statecraft back to the earliest endeavors of colonial appropriation of territory from Aboriginal people and highlighted how particular sensibilities about place (based on utilitarian and romantic ethics) powerfully shaped how places were ordered and defined, known, and thus acted on. Given the history that has now passed, the long struggle for rights waged by Aboriginal people, and the many gains they have won, why, then, does planning remain so connected (in ontological and epistemological terms) to its colonial roots?

It does so because state-based environmental planning in Victoria continues

to be blind to its own cultural constructions of place. Despite significant shifts in favor of (some) Aboriginal interests in relation to land use and management, this has always occurred by defining an Aboriginal Other that can be brought safely into the existing regulatory regime without unsettling the epistemological and ontological philosophies that underpin that regime. Planning never has to ask about its own cultural view of place or question its own knowledge. It simply has to include other/ed cultural views of and knowledge about place (Aboriginal ones and sometimes other “Others” as well). Thus, planning continues to simply reconstitute its relations with Aboriginal people within colonial structures of power, even when apparently more progressive processes and relationships are being developed. Investigating planning in this way opens up new understandings of planning as a cultural practice, one that continues to re/imagine the colonial map through its own technological and epistemological canon.

In doing so, this research raises important implications for planning education. Critical histories such as this expose new aspects of planning’s roots and ask us to question the assumptive base of our discipline in our theory, practice, and also our teaching. It requires critically rethinking—or at least having a critical take on—the canon of knowledge that we ask students of planning to acquire and at least a critical reflection by students of their own cultural positions. Decolonizing planning—unlocking it from its colonially constituted relationships—is a complex job but must at least include attention to planning education if not begin there. It is a matter of justice.

***Author’s Note:*** *The author acknowledges the Wadi Wadi people and the Aboriginal community of northwest Victoria and also the assistance of Ruth Fincher and Lisa Palmer in the preparation of this material. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.*

## Notes

1. *Country* is an Aboriginal English word that refers to “the collective identity shared by a group of people, their land (and sea) estate” (Palmer 2001, 10) and includes all the “values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations” associated with that estate (Smyth 1994, 12). Its italicization in this article highlights the importance of the word within the Aboriginal domain.
2. It is important to note that indigenous people have successfully employed both utilitarian and romantic constructions of place and their relationship with place to bargain for increased participation in nature conservation (see Craig 1992; De Lacy and Lawson 1997; Smyth 2001; Lawrence 2002) and to bargain for royalties from natural resource extraction (see Carroll 1983; Toyne and Vachon 1983; Anderson 1989; Hawke and Gallagher 1989; Merlan 1991; Howitt, Connell, and Hirsch 1996; Lane 2000; Ross 2001).
3. Interview by the author with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) forest manager, February 24, 2003, DNRE Mildura office, Victoria.

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