Incorporating values of the public data (community values) into Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) assessments

Forests, Fire and Regions Group invests in the Integrated Forest Ecosystem Research Agreement (IFER) with the University of Melbourne (UM), to deliver critical science projects that support policy and operational practices. The core research themes of IFER include biodiversity, carbon, hazards, socio-economic, vulnerability and water. *Incorporating values of the public data (community values) into Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) assessments* is an IFER Socio-Economic supplementary project. It commenced in January 2019 and is due to be completed by June 2019.

The Project

Members of the Victorian public value the natural, cultural, recreational, learning, social, economic and experiential attributes of forests. Incorporating these values of the public in decision-making about forests can help to ensure accountability and transparency.

The *Incorporating values of the public data (community values) into Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) assessments* project will consolidate findings from existing research about the values of the Victorian public, to support the RFA assessments project. The research will also underpin future community engagement and the results will support future forest and fire management planning within Victoria.

The project will add to existing knowledge of the 'values' considered important in RFAs, including environmental values, the economic value of forested areas and forest industries, and social values (including community needs). There is an opportunity to incorporate values that are now better understood than previously, including the importance of experience and recreation in forests on the ability to realise community values in planning processes.

Project Outputs

The project will provide DELWP with:

- a report summarising relevant findings of existing social values research for RFA purposes

- an analysis of implications of these findings for RFA social assessments and community engagement, primarily a gap analysis, and

- support for incorporating social values questions in DELWP community engagement activities.

Values refer broadly to what is important to members of the public and in decision-making. To explore people's valuing of forests, three concepts of value are defined. Valued entities are tangible landscape elements that can be mapped and managed. Valued attributes are somewhat abstract qualities of entities that help explain why they are important to people. Core values are very abstract ideas about what is important in people's lives overall.

Valued attributes have similarities to policy objectives and provide an appropriate framework for considering how values of the public are incorporated in RFA modernisation and forest management planning (**Figure 1**).

Attributes of Victorian forests valued by the public are (broadly in descending order of importance):

- **Natural:** life support function of forests for the diversity of living beings

- **Experiential:** value of forests for positive experiences and feelings

- **Setting (Recreation):** location or setting affording a social or recreational activity

- **Cultural:** repository of human history and memory, source of inspiration

- **Learning:** the opportunity to expand scientific knowledge

- **Productive:** the productive capacity of forests for resource extraction

- **Social-economic:** value to society derived from forest-based economic activity

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These valued attributes have a basis in people's core values, particularly in Biospherism (concern for protecting and respective nature) and Egoism (performance, pursuing success). Comparison with other studies reveals similar sets of valued attributes are invoked in forest and public land contexts, but a much wider set of valued attributes is relevant to bushfire risk management.

The Research Team

The project is being conducted by Dr Rebecca Ford and Professor Kathryn Williams at the University of Melbourne, in close collaboration with DELWP staff.
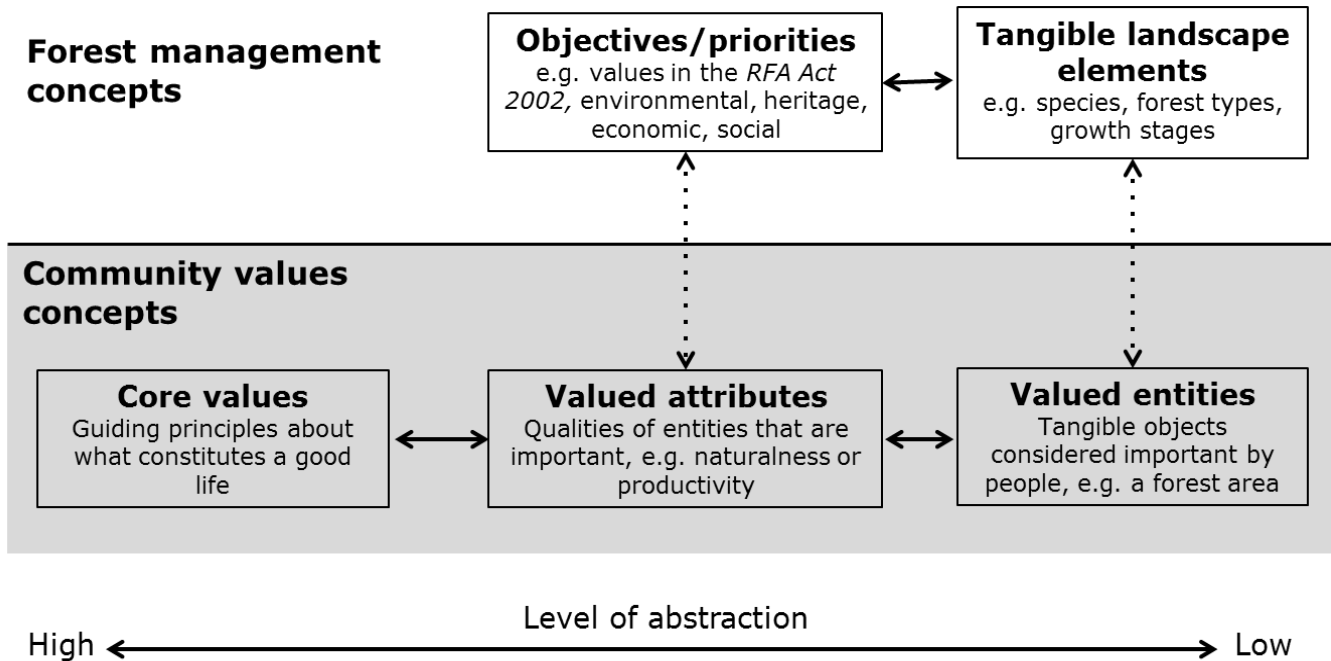
Forest management concepts

Objectives/priorities	Tangible landscape elements
e.g. values in the *RFA Act 2002,* environmental, heritage, economic, social	e.g. species, forest types, growth stages

Community values concepts

Core values	Valued attributes	Valued entities
Guiding principles about what constitutes a good life	Qualities of entities that are important, e.g. naturalness or productivity	Tangible objects considered important by people, e.g. a forest area

Level of abstraction

High ←——————————————————→ Low

Figure 1: Aligned concepts of values in forest management and the community

Values are an underlying factor in public judgements about the acceptability of forest management but are not the only factor. Personal knowledge, trust in managers and context are also important.

In structured decision-making processes, a wide range of values is typically represented in objectives. But it is not easy to incorporate all relevant values. The knowledge base of land management agencies is suited to assessing Natural, Productive and Economic valued attributes, but there are difficulties in fully assessing some other values of the public, particularly Experiential, Cultural and Social attributes of forests.

Policy and Operational Implications

The project will synthesise data from previous research, so that it can be incorporated into decision-making and community engagement frameworks. The research will contribute to policy by enabling DELWP to make the best use of existing social values research, ensuring that decisions around balancing multiple values are transparent, informed and supported by contemporary community values.

Image 1: Attributes of Victorian forests valued by the community include natural values
Photos: Rebecca Ford

Project Status

The final report has been submitted to DELWP for review and the project is expected to be complete at the end of June 2019.