

Commons Conversations Podcast - Building Coalitions and Campaigns to Protect Forests with Jess Beckerling

Mike

Hi there, I'm Mike Tucak, community broadcaster from Perth / Borloo. Whadjuk Noongar land in Western Australia. I'm bringing you this Commons Conversation podcast for The Commons Social Change Library. I'm joined today by Jess Beckerling, campaign director of the WA Forest Alliance. Jess, welcome.

Jess Beckerling

Thanks so much, Mike. It's lovely to be here.

Mike

Now Jess, you're a very busy person. And you've got 20 years of experience as a campaigner in protecting native forests in Western Australia. Can we start our chat today by you giving us a bit of a summary of what you do in your role with the WA Forest Alliance?

Jess Beckerling

Sure, so I'm the campaign director. We've got six staff. And we're split over our Denmark office down in Bibbulman Country, and then another office up in the city. And we've got a very active and busy committee that we work alongside as well. So the WA Forest Alliance has been around since 1990, and we're the peak forest conservation group in WA, we represent 27 other forest conservation groups, including some large groups; Wilderness Society and Conservation Council of WA, and then also a whole range of smaller groups across the Southwest. And we advocate for those big picture policy changes that we believe we can achieve, and that are critically important for protecting as much of the Southwest forests as we can at any one time.

Mike

So the role that the alliance has is really both organising all the member groups to bring them together, and then that prime role of advocating for forests.

Jess Beckerling

That's right. So we look after our member groups in terms of helping them to develop strategy and to be as functional as possible around localised issues that are coming up for them. And then we also draw together the power of all of those groups to aim at those broader statewide issues.

Mike

And you've been described as a seasoned campaigner with over 20 years of experience in the area. Can you give us an overview of the types of campaigns you've been involved in over that time?

Jess Beckerling

Yeah, I suppose I am seasoned. I've been at it since 1997. I started off when I was 18, I was a uni student. And I joined the environment department at UWA, and went down to my first forest blockade. It wasn't actually a blockade at that time, they hadn't started logging yet, but they were planning to, and it was absolutely incredibly beautiful old growth Karri forest.

And then on the other side of the road, there was a recent clearfell. So it was very strong, striking. I still really remember the experience of that tangible realization of what was being lost and the urgency around protecting what was left.

Meeting some incredible people, I ended up staying in those blockades from 97 till 2001. And learning so much about, you know, direct action and community building, and strategy and tactic.

And also, that combination between direct action, which we were completely immersed in as a group of people living together for those few years, and then also how we interacted with the campaign that was running across the state, but largely in the city, which was more around communications and lobbying, and advocacy and building power in the metro context. And that was incredibly rich and rewarding, also very physically challenging, and often a pretty intense experience.

And then over the years since then, I've worked in lots and lots of different ways. And most recently around public education and mobilising support and pointing it more directly, I suppose, at a government decision maker, in order to get the policy change that we recently achieved of ending native forest logging. So yeah, many, many different ways of campaigning. And I guess, just to say, I feel like I've really learned on the job rather than with particular kind of intentional trainings. And I've been very lucky to have done that alongside some incredibly smart and dedicated people.

And now I look back knowing the tools that we use and that are so well explained and such an excellent resource on the Commons Library, knowing that we were using and employing those techniques in quite an intuitive way. And now I can see how we can use them more forward looking. And that's been an interesting approach to learning campaigning that I've really enjoyed.

Mike

Clearly, you've had success with this recently with the WA State Government ending native forest logging from 2024. Let's look a little bit deeper then into how you

organised the campaigns. What do you see as being the fundamental elements for a campaign, looking at the very building blocks?

Jess Beckerling

Well, I guess in the first instance, it depends what your goal is and what your problems are. I think it's critical and the very first thing that you need to do is know that you're doing something that's really important, that's going to keep your attention, that you're going to be able to mobilise people around, and that it's achievable. And then starting to understand what's in the way of achieving it.

And quite often, it's about decision makers, obviously, whether they're governments, or industry, decision makers or others, and then really starting to knuckle down into asking yourself some important questions about what are the obstacles? Why hasn't this thing that so clearly needs to change already changed? Who's standing in the way of it? And why? Are they standing in the way of it because they're ideologically opposed? Or are they just not interested and they've got other priorities? Is there a risk for them in making that change that they can't see beyond? And then you need to start thinking about how you increase your power, make it into something that they do have to pay attention to, and simultaneously, if this is the case, reduce the risk from that decision maker's perspective.

So that's always the approach that the WA campaign has taken, I think, sometimes more consciously than others, I like to sort of think of campaigning as like, you know, we're on a road, the status quo is one straight road. Our job is to push people to push that status quo in a different direction. But it's not enough just to put pressure on one side, you also need to open up what the pathway is on the other side.

So what we've done tangibly here is developing proposals and solutions. One of the good ones that we developed in 2016 was called Forests for Life. And it articulated a very clear strategy for transitioning the timber industry in terms of very clear and succinct and well researched, robust research on the number of employees that could be created in a farm forestry sector rather than in the timber industry and various other socioeconomic considerations, because we knew that that was a real hurdle for the state government.

So I think that is, in terms of your question about the building blocks, I think that's where it needs to start really; conceptualising the problem, and understanding what's in your way. And then you can start thinking about how you can break that problem down into manageable chunks. And often you're not the best person or you're not equipped, even within your team, to be able to break those chunks down. Often, you need to go and find other people to be a part of doing that. And that's where the power mapping exercise can be so useful.

Mike

It sounds like collaboration is a very important part. And I imagine for the Forest Alliance as a member-based organisation that's very important from the outset; to coordinate all of your members together. And from what you've just described, it sounds like it's also finding those other allies, as well as collaborating, in effect, with the authority or the department or the government that you're trying to persuade, that you've got to provide them that path forward. So that sounds like collaboration is there across the board. What do you think makes collaboration effective? How do you best collaborate with others?

Jess Beckerling

Yeah, well, I think especially seeing as you raised the fact that sometimes you're collaborating with those decision makers, sometimes that collaboration isn't obvious or direct, right? They wouldn't see them as collaborating with you necessarily, but you're thinking about what they need in order to make that change. So in order to do that, you need two things, you need to build your own power so that you're being taken seriously. But you also need to be able to be constructive, and not combative in the way that you're engaging with those decision makers. That isn't always the case.

I mean, there were many years here when the Barnett government was in power, when I was campaigning, and we just could not get through to that government about the need to make change for the environment in just about any capacity. And so we were really waiting that government out, we were trying to get small changes that we could and using regulation and, and legal avenues, and occasionally just disruption and making it too difficult for the timber industry. But we knew that we weren't going to get the big policy change that we were aiming for. So by no means were we collaborating with decision makers. But we were building power and collaborating within and with lots of different allies and unusual allies within the community.

But then later on, when we knew we were approaching a real change within government, then the collaboration became a lot stronger and clearer and more direct. And we could have a really good back and forth. And occasionally that would get quite tricky. Because you want to be maintaining and building on those relationships. You want people within government, senior advisors, and others to be able to really trust you. But sometimes you also have to really be able to push back because you know, what's happening on the ground is unacceptable, or the policy development is going in the wrong direction. And sometimes it's that tension that's the most difficult and interesting.

The thing I'd really encourage people to do is just think about who we have around us in terms of mentors, who can help us through those tricky things. Because I've found

in my time, the thing that's kept me going and that's helped me to learn and stay on track the best has been having an informal council of people I can go to and say, you know, 'this relationship is really tricky, and it's so critical that I get it right. How do I navigate this next stage?' And then being able to sound that off with a few people. Yeah, I couldn't have done it without them.

Mike

In that situation would it be a mentor or someone who can advise who would know about that particular other person that you're dealing with? Or has just had experience in similar sorts of areas? Similar relationships?

Jess Beckerling

I don't think that they need to know the people necessarily personally. But they're people who've got a good political read, you know, for this particular scenario. And they know how politics develops, and they know what's going on for a senior advisor when they're having conversations with you. And quite often, I've found that the best mentors are the ones who can really listen to you and know what you're thinking already. And then help you to dig down into that rather than necessarily giving you a direct answer, or precise step that they think you should take next, it's more about unpacking what your read is already about how you can progress this, knowing what the risks are, and stepping through it in the best possible way.

Mike

That does seem to echo what gets said a lot in many areas; that finding a good, effective mentor who you can work well with is a very important step.

Jess Beckerling

Yeah. And I've had about five colleagues, some of whom we have just a collaborative relationship, we talked through campaigns together, and others who are well ahead of me, you know, the two women particularly I'm thinking of who are in their 70s, who are looking back at where I'm at now. And I think both of those are really good. And also spreading it around, not just having one or two. But having an informal council of advisors has been fabulous for me.

Mike

Now you've mentioned, you wrote an article for the Commons Library, which was entitled, 'winning long game collaborative grassroots campaigns: the WA forest campaign experience.' In that you outlined 21 approaches to campaigns. And whilst we won't recap all of those here, a key one that stood out to me reading it was that culture eats strategy for breakfast, which is an essence that a strong culture within the organisation or the campaign is what will enable you to enact the strategy, effectively, dynamically and flexibly. Let's talk a bit about that. Let's talk a little bit

about strategy and then move on to culture. What does an effective strategy mean to you?

Jess Beckerling

Well, in the first instance, as I said before, it's about really knowing what your goal is, and articulating that very clearly. So I think the SMART goal is a really useful way to do it, I put in an extra 'A', as many other people do. So it's not just achievable. It's also ambitious. I don't think we've got time to be anything but ambitious, but obviously, we also need to make sure that what we're aiming at is possible. So a SMAART goal is critical. I think if you've really thought through what your goal is in terms of those criteria, then you know, where you think you're going to get that win, not just what you're trying to do. So I think you just can't go beyond the need for articulating your goal.

And then as I talked about before, it's about really understanding who your decision makers are, what are the hurdles? What are the risks from their perspective? Why haven't they done it already? And then how are you going to build power and leverage? Building power and leverage is an art form, and it's a bit of a dance, and it has to be dynamic, and it has to be very flexible. You don't always know precisely, particularly I don't think in the first year or so of a new big campaign, which of the different elements of power building are going to reap the best rewards. But if you know what you're aiming at very specifically and tangibly, and you can go big and loud and strong, and you can build respect as you're moving so that you keep your allies with you. and you keep building movement as you go. Things will kind of jump out at you in that first year or so. And you'll realize that there's opportunities there. And then it's about developing on those opportunities and testing them out seeing how far you can take them, but not becoming too wedded to one or the other.

I think quite often, campaigners, especially when we're reasonably new, or we've been around for 10 years or so, we think that the critical pathway and the power mapping and those other tools are sort of set in stone. And because we're still feeling it out, we don't really feel confident to say I don't actually know what my critical path is. I don't think that we often know what our critical path is. I think it's much easier to define it in retrospect than it is from your starting position. And that's actually okay.

As long as you're developing a very strong culture and you're trusted and respected and you're building allies as you go because people are happy to stand with you for all those reasons. Then opportunities will develop along the way. And that's why that link is so important to culture.

I think we've been really lucky in the environment movement in Australia, and also in the social justice movement, and against nukes, and all sorts of excellent work that's been done, that we have this kind of multi-generational legacy and support base that

feeds and nurtures the current crop of campaigners across so many different sectors. And that gives us such strength.

So I think that is real testament to the fact that the culture is strong and good, and wherever that exists, it's generally an indication of that good culture. And then we can kind of look deeply into that. And we start to see that it's about feminism, it's about intersectionality, it's about recognizing that the problem is bigger than just the one goal that we're working towards, and that we're going to be ambitious. And we're going to strive towards that goal.

But we're not going to lose sight of the big picture, which is that we live in a world with so many different injustices. And we're not going to be expedient in achieving our goal, we're not going to throw any of those other important issues under the bus while we're on our way to do that.

And then we're building, we're building, we're building all the time, we're taking care of people around us, I think that's absolutely critical. And in our campaign, we take very seriously, looking after each other, there's a small team of us, six, as I said, and then an active committee. And we really look out for each other and make sure that if there's particular upskilling people need or if they're doing something that they hate, which is a recipe for burnout, that we take that particular role off them and give it to somebody else. And we just try and lean into each other as much as possible. And really try and manage that distinction between: who's the person in this campaign? And also, what is their role? And how do you take care of both of those two perspectives and components at the same time? So yeah, hope that answers your question. I think it was a little bit wide ranging. But to me, culture and strategy really have to live together,

Mike

I imagine with the way that WA Alliance works, with all of your member groups, that there may be additional layers of that culture issue in terms of the culture of other organisations that you're working with, whether actually, that is members or also other allies that you're working alongside. How do you manage that process where culture might differ between different participants?

Jess Beckerling

That's really tricky. And one of the things that we do is maintain a real dynamism and fast pace, where we move very quickly through our campaigns, because we're quite small, and we don't have to go to a national organisation or you know, to many, many layers of bureaucracy to get approvals for things. So that gives us a real dynamism and energy that we love, and that other organisations are sometimes envious of, because it looks quite simple. It's tricky, then building alliances with other organisations who necessarily need to move more slowly. And we just try and find

strengths and recognize where those alliances are so critical and support each other so that it can be functional. But then also, because we're quick and dynamic, that can also be quite hard on people in our team and volunteers and other member groups that we work with.

I think we in WAFA probably have very high expectations of ourselves, and we don't like to slack off or take our eyes off the prize. So that does bring an inbuilt need to take really good care of each other and tell each other when we think it's time to take a rest. But I guess again, it's about having an eye to the big picture and also to the small issues at the same time so that you can be keeping ahead of yourself and moving towards your goal, but also looking after the day to day.

Mike

And would there be things then, flipping that over, are things that you would say you find the least helpful or the least useful, whether it's with strategy or culture collaboration?

Jess Beckerling

Yeah, I think rigidity is the least helpful thing, whether that's in your strategy, whether you think you've got a perfect ultimate strategy that you don't need to review, because it's done and it's fixed. Sometimes that creeps in accidentally because people have got funding around a particular strategic pathway. And now they don't feel like they can make any changes to it. Other times, it's because the person who set that strategy is stuck on it from an egotistical perspective. I think in either case, rigidity is really problematic. And that's the same in culture. You know, **we need to be able to stay open minded and humble and ready to make changes as we see the need arise.**

Mike

You talk in the article that I mentioned earlier about the need to be fierce around accuracy and the importance of accurate information being a foundation for trust in what you're trying to achieve. Would you say the same happens there in terms of sticking to a strategy, and how do you ensure that you're staying true to and accountable to what your goals are, what your strategy is, over the course of a campaign?

Jess Beckerling

Accuracy has been beaten into me and many others in the WA campaign by a particular matriarch who will never let anything run with an incorrect apostrophe or anything. So we're very, very attuned to that and respectful of her by having brought that into all the work that we do, which has been really good. So yeah, that's fundamental, I think in terms of the fierceness to knowing that you've got a good strategy, I guess the way that we try and maintain it is we have weekly meetings with

the staff. And then we have two committee members who are very active volunteers in the campaign who sit in on that. And we take time each week, while we're looking at the kind of minutia, the day to day of everything that everyone's been doing, to also give ourselves time to pull the lens back.

I'm doing a course at the moment with Social Impact Leadership Australia, they talk about getting up on the balcony, which is a nice way of thinking about it, and assessing whether we're going in the direction that we thought we were going in, and what adjustments we've made along the way, maybe intuitively, maybe without discussing them, and how we want to make that visible and discuss it. So we try and do that quite deliberately. And we also get together on a retreat twice a year and talk through all of the strategy. I think it's also just an internal process. And I'm trying to make sure that I pass over a lot of what I do, intuitively and automatically into more formal processes and write them down so that the rest of the team can be seeing more about the way that I'm flitting through the day and the week and doing what I'm doing. So I think it's a bit of a combo of those two things again, you know, trusting yourself and being intuitive, but also making it formal and visible so that other people can come on the journey with you.

Mike

And looking perhaps a bit more at what things can go wrong, if there are other participants in a campaign, whether it's your member groups or other allies, who aren't sticking to a strategy or culturally playing it the way that you would like, how do you manage something like that if things seem to be sort of going a little bit awry around the path forward?

Jess Beckerling

I really struggle with that stuff. I said earlier that that's a recipe for burnout, when people are doing something that they really don't enjoy. What I really struggle with is when there's a conflict, an interpersonal conflict, or a strategic conflict that's not being addressed or not being brought to the surface.

And so I've got an excellent colleague who came on to the committee recently, who has a huge amount of experience in HR, from an academic background, and also from other organisations she's worked in, and she's really just stepped in to help me manage those sorts of dynamics. And that was a lifesaver for me. So yeah, it's going and finding other people who can assist you, I think, when those sorts of things get really complex,

Mike

And possibly also knowing when it's time to escalate for want of a better word, something to look more closely at what's working and not not working.

Jess Beckerling

That's right, and, and to part ways when necessary, because, you know, if we're all facing in the same direction, if we've got the same purpose and intention, but we're doing things differently, then trusting other people to run their campaign their way, and not going in each other's way anymore, can also just be the right thing to do.

Mike

And maybe looking again at a more positive side of things. What are some of the campaigns or initiatives that really excite or inspire you to do what you do?

Jess Beckerling

Well, I've been so inspired by the work that's being done on the east coast in the last few weeks around Palestine. The disruption that's been happening at the ports, particularly in the efforts to stop the shipments on the ZIM line over to Israel, you know, people noticing that things are just so wrong and have gone so awry, and being smart and serious and fearless and bringing their friends and their colleagues along and building a visible movement that's just says no to that stuff is so inspiring and important, and there's just not nearly enough of it. So I've been very, very inspired by that in these last few weeks.

Yeah, it just breaks my heart what's going on in Palestine and the way that the Australian Government is responding to it, you know, as our most close power broker, I suppose, but also obviously internationally. And yeah, people's courage is the inspiration that I always need.

Mike

Have there been particular things that you've learned along the way that you would say are your key lessons learned that we haven't already touched on?

Jess Beckerling

Well, I think the other thing is about really staying connected to the thing that you're working on. You know, we can end up being so busy with the internal machinations of our organisation, or the minutiae of the lobbying that we're doing or events that we're putting on, I think if you really want to be able to stick around for the long run, and you want to stay true to the reasons that you got there in the first place, and what you're really trying to do at the deeper level, and to give yourself endurance, it's about staying connected to that real purpose. And for me, that's being in the bush. And, you know, just just being quiet and connected and keeping my feet on the ground.

Mike

And perhaps then looking back at the work you've done over 20 plus years, what are some of the projects, campaigns, or the particular steps along the way that you're most proud of or happiest with?

Jess Beckerling

Well, the ultimate goal is getting forest properly and securely, permanently protected in national parks, and then making sure that they're very well managed. **So it's never ending.** Forest advocacy is an ongoing task, you never feel like you've done it now and you can pack it away. But the closest that you get is when forests are securely protected in national parks. And the management plan is written in such a way that you know that they can't be logged and they can't be mined.

So at the end of the old growth campaign, which was 2001, we protected 230,000 hectares of some of the most spectacular Karri, Jarrah, Tingle, Wandoo, Marri forests that were left, and they don't exist anywhere else in the world. And they're just so precious. So that was massive. And when we had the announcement from McGowan over two years ago, now, 'ending native forest logging' was a nice sentence. But what really matters is that we're going to have an additional 400,000 hectares of forests put into secure national parks. So that's the really good stuff.

Just today at a much smaller level, the last ever two month logging plan was published on the government's website. And I've been holding my breath because there's some really precious forests that I absolutely love that is so deep in the hearts of other people who I really love who who have worked to defend them as well. And they weren't on the list. So that's the very last logging plan. And we know that those forests are now going to be securely protected. So yeah, that's it. Yeah. It's a huge, huge relief when you know that those places that are so precious and irreplaceable, once they're gone, they're gone forever, that you've gotten there in time, and you've gotten the threat out of the way.

Mike

And I imagine that's what lies immediately ahead for you then, that ongoing work of the forest management.

Jess Beckerling

Yeah, so the other problem is that the National Parks are largely centred in the southern forest because of Alcoa's massive mining lease right across the northern jarrah forest. So we're fighting hard now to make sure that National Parks are also created in the northern jarrah forest, and we've just instigated a new campaign called 'End Forest Mining', and we're trying to make sure that we stop those mining

expansions, which are proposed right across the forest, but particularly in the northern part of the WA forests. That's critical, we need to make sure we achieve that.

And then the other thing is how those forests are managed once they're in National Park, and we've got a huge problem with prescribed burning. I know that's the case in other parts of Australia as well. Down here 200,000+ hectares are burned intentionally by the department every year and we're seeing places like peat wetlands and tingle forests, granite outcrops that should never be burnt in that way, just being incinerated. So we've got a lot of work ahead of us on that front, as well. And, you know, advocacy needs to be ongoing.

And that's partly why our culture needs to be so good and our strategies because we need to pass them on to the next generation and pass on the forest in the best nick that we can, but also the campaign in the best nick that we can so that they can continue it into the future.

Mike

Well it does sound like you are well placed to continue doing that work. And Jess, I'd also like to mention that you were earlier this year inducted into the WA Women's Hall of Fame for your ongoing work in this area. So I wanted to say congratulations for that as well.

Jess Beckerling

Oh, thanks.

Mike

Well, thanks very much, Jess, for having a discussion with us on the Commons Conversations and keep up the fantastic work that you are doing for the protection of native forests in Western Australia.

Jess Beckerling

Thanks so much. It's been a pleasure to talk to you