

Evan Christen

John Williams, Commissioner
Forests Assessment
Natural Resources Commission
Sydney, NSW

23rd October, 2010

Dear John,

Please find below my response to the preliminary assessment report "Riverina Bioregion Regional Forest Assessment River Red Gums and Woodland Forests".

My submission is around the need to conserve these forests not only for the flora and fauna but also for the communities that use these forests as a place for recreation. I actually think it goes beyond recreation and that these forests are important community assets that have cultural importance. These forests allow us to practice Australian cultural customs, I mean this as apart from the cultural importance felt by indigenous Australians. These cultural customs for my family and many others in the region have been to spend time in these forests camping, fishing, walking, swimming and generally relaxing in the magnificent surroundings. My children when young have had their nappies filled with sand from the beaches, burnt their fingers in campfires and revelled in the water. As they grew older they grew to appreciate the birds and animals that live there, the thrill of catching a fish and a windstorm in the gum trees. Now as I grow older it is a wonderful place of solitude and opportunity to appreciate the great Australian landscape. The red gum forests are a 'tradition' in our family as well as many others.

How much are the forests used? I can relate that on the Murrumbidgee around Darlington Point on long weekends it is difficult to find a spot to camp on the river. There is a tent every few hundred metres. Community groups regularly use the forest for camp outs, up to 200 children at a time! There would not be many families with children in the Riverina who do not visit the river at least once a year.

As well as this cultural practice of individuals/families visiting the Murrumbidgee forests there are now gradually developing ecotourism industries. One company runs a camp ground and canoe tours at Gogelderie weir, another organises bird tours (TEMP at Leeton) and there have been investigations by another about starting Ecotourism in the region. However, ecotourism can only be a feasible business if the natural habitat is intact, and maintained to provide the greatest natural asset values for cultural, social and recreational uses. This brings me to my next point.

I feel that the red gum forests generally on the Murrumbidgee and especially in the areas of operational logging (around Darlington Point and up to Narrandera) are becoming more and more degraded. The logging in these forests is becoming increasingly destructive; there is little or no regrowth, obviously due to the drought. The drought means that little rain falls on the forests and there are no flooding events. How can the cleared areas be expected to regrow? Further there is unmanaged cattle grazing in the forests (prevents understory and seedling growth, promotes spread

of weeds) feral animals and weeds. So, even when undisturbed by logging many areas are suffering great stress from the drought with trees dying, and other degradation due to poor management of animals and weeds. I see this as a lose:lose situation. The timber industry will ultimately be lost and in the process the future of the forests to provide other values will be lost. Present lost and future lost.

The timber industry is unsustainable due to the changed climatic conditions

. The sawmilling is not going to be sustainable under these climatic conditions. I have been appalled in recent years at the devastation occurring, it appears that the forest cannot survive this treatment. The grazing provides a little return for a few farmers who provide no management input to control weeds, feral animals or bank erosion.

So a choice has to be made, either logging and other poor management practices continues creating devastation and the forest is ultimately ruined, or logging is ended and a recovery plan put in place that provides the possibility for the forests to be sustained into the future. These future forests can then continue to provide our social and cultural needs. I am sure also that with a changed approach to managing these forests tourism will continue to grow. Tourism is the biggest growth industry in the world, it is likely to provide a more sustained livelihood from these forests than the logging and grazing that currently occurs.

In summary my submission tries to provide evidence of the social and cultural values of these forests that seem to have been given little attention in the preliminary assessment. Based on this evidence I emphasise the need to conserve these forests. I suggest that the forests in future be managed to promote social, cultural and ecotourism values to preserve this part of the great Australian landscape.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'E' followed by 'W', 'C', and 'K'.

Dr Evan W. Christen