

Penny Davidson

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".

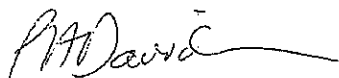
I am concerned about an unbalanced representation of the values associated with these forests. The report has about 24 pages that document the ecological values of the red gum forests, which are very important, perhaps the most important; but in comparison 10 pages given to the heritage values, of which the bulk is given to indigenous heritage, there are about 14 pages on economic values and only about 4 pages on social/recreational values. At a simplistic level this suggests that the economic values are better known, understood and valued than the other 'social' values. The logical interpretation of this is that the social values associated with these forests is not adequately understood. On page 101 it is stated that "the NRC will undertake its own costs benefits analyses and social assessments". One wonders why this was not undertaken before releasing this preliminary assessment as a full social assessment is required for a satisfactory decision, and one would hope that the community has adequate opportunity to reflect and comment on these findings and yet considering the time frame that the final report will be delivered on 30th November 2009 there will be little or no opportunity for comment on the assessment of cost benefit analyses and social assessments. Considering the above a charge could be levelled at this preliminary assessment that it recognises and favours use values over non-use values, and production values over non-production values.

I draw your attention to evidence that the so-called social values deserve more attention and weight than currently given:

- Choosing to fish, canoe or picnic in environments such as the red gum forests is not just recreation – these are our **cultural** practices and threat or harm to cultural practices is a weighty matter. By way of example, proposed changes to lower the water levels in Lake Mulwala resulted in a huge public outcry because lower water levels in the lake would impact on the local and visitor lifestyle and leisure industry – see Howard 2008; also Rogan & O'Connor 2005.
- There is growing recognition and research into the contribution that the natural environment makes to our individual and community well being. We are recognising more and more that our own health is dependent on having healthy ecosystems around us – not just snippets and examples for us to look at, but whole systems that we can be a part of (see Mitchell & Popham 2008; de Vries et al. 2003; van dan Berg et al. 2007).

There is increasing public opinion that ecosystems such as these red gum forests are important cultural assets, and there is now research that shows that these assets provide measurable positive impacts upon our wellbeing (includes physical and mental health). When determining the future of the red gum forests the good of the population at large needs to be considered, as well as the good of the local communities adjacent to the forests. These ecosystems are under great stress. I urge the assessment to make conservation of the red gum forests a priority for the well being of future as well as current generations. This requires looking well beyond the use values dominating this preliminary assessment.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PA Davidson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Penelope. A. Davidson

References:

- Howard, J.L. (2008) The Future of the Murray River: Amenity reconsidered? Geographical Research 46 (3) pp291-302
- Mitchell, R. and F. Popham (2008). "Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study." Lancet 372: 1655-1660.
- Rogan, R., M. O'Connor, et al. (2005). "Nowhere to hide: Awareness and perceptions of environmental change, and their influence on relationships with place." Journal of Environmental Psychology 25(2): 147-158.
- van den Berg, A. E., T. Hartig, et al. (2007). "Preference for Nature in Urbanized Societies: Stress, Restoration, and the Pursuit of Sustainability." Journal of Social Issues 63(1): 79-96.
- de Vries, S., R. Verheij, A. , et al. (2003). "Natural environments – healthy environments? An exploratory analysis of the relationship between greenspace and health." Environment and Planning A 35(10): 1717-1731.