

Glen Eira Environment Group submission on Red Gum
Forests to the New South Wales Natural Resources
Commission

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23 October 2009

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About Glen Eira Environment Group

Glen Eira Environment Group (GEEG) is based in Melbourne but members take an interest in a broad range of environmental issues. It is safe to say that all GEEG members have grave concerns regarding the health of the Murray River system. The health of the river system and its waters cannot of course be separated from the health of its native flora and fauna.

Introduction

According to the Terms of Reference for this inquiry "The New South Wales Government intends to make a forest agreement with respect to the river red gum and woodland forests within the NSW Riverina IBRA and the South-Western Cypress State Forests in order to determine conservation outcomes and a sustainable future for the forests, the forestry industry and local communities in the region."

We will comment only on issues affecting the Red Gum Forests.

Context

The Murray River system has been relatively heavily populated since people first arrived many thousands of years ago, but it is only since the arrival of Europeans that human activity has begun to seriously threaten the health and productivity of the system.

The present economic system which requires ever-increasing extraction of profits and no consideration of 'externalities' is partly to blame. Aboriginal claims to ownership or control of land are denied because that is seen as a threat to profits. The political system is geared only for short-term responses, and is mostly dominated by the forces for exploitation. Finally, most people arriving in this country since 1788, have struggled to transform the landscape into a mirror of Europe, with insufficient understanding of, or regard to, the natural limitations.

It is time we realised that we live in the driest of habited lands and periods of extended dryness is part of the natural climate. We cannot blame the climate for our own shortcomings and lack of foresight.

Our view is that historically Europeans have overcleared and overcut the Red Gum Forests and this has adversely impacted the waterways (e.g. altered runoff, increased salinity) and biodiversity of the region. There has also been too much water extraction from the rivers. We believe these excesses are now generally recognized, but not necessarily acted upon.

Sustainability

1. Land and water use is constantly changing but as the basic systems are natural, most emphasis needs to be given to protecting those systems, so that our fluctuating demands do not eliminate future potential uses.

2. We strongly disagree with the idea of 'triage' whereby only what are perceived as icon environmental sites are to get adequate (though minimal) water to maintain flora and fauna. Indigenous vegetation needs to be maintained throughout the region, especially along the streams, so that the native fauna can migrate easily from area to area to find food and breeding opportunities, and to accommodate seasonal needs. Triage is very likely to lead to extra pressure on already stressed systems and in particular increase the risk to threatened species.

We need to massively increase water flows according to the seasonal rhythms that are needed to ensure the health of Riverina Red Gum forests into the future.

Decisions on water flows must take into account downstream impacts outside the Riverina region.

3. We ought to be restoring once common fauna to the region as the indigenous fauna is as much a part of a native forest ecosystem as the trees. This means paying more attention to restoring and maintaining the understory of the forests as well as the old trees.

Trees are stores of water that can be accessed by native fauna – insects, possums, etc. and the things that eat them.

Many of the insects that live in trees fall into the rivers and are eaten by fish, so trees produce fish. Fish need good water and food, and snags for refuge and reproduction.

4. As forests are an excellent way to store carbon, maximising the extent of old growth forest is an easy, non-technical way to achieve carbon capture. It should be recognised that a forest that is not being logged for timber is nevertheless performing an economic role – storing carbon is one of those economic functions (we might even get paid for it).

Old trees produce the most nectar and provide the best habitat for hollow dependant fauna.

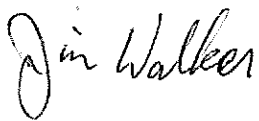
5. Large Red Gum National Parks are needed because these Red Gum forests are vulnerable under national reserve criteria. At the very least the minimum requirements of the national criteria for Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative reserves for forests should be met, but this should be just the starting point.

Areas of Red Gum forest in National Parks are crucial to ecosystem resilience. They serve as refuges for fauna during times of extended dry.

6. Aboriginal custodians should have a strong role in Red Gum National Park management because:

- It is aboriginal use of fire, and harvesting and cultivation of food resources that shaped the landscape which Europeans found upon their arrival in this country.
- Red Gum forests are cultural landscapes that provide food and medicines and contain many burial grounds and sacred sites
- Traditional owners have detailed ecological knowledge and customary obligations to care for country

Joint Management should bring new employment opportunities for Aboriginal communities



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