

Submission on River Red Gum inquiry Terms of Reference

Wood is far and away the most abundant renewable material on earth. It is disheartening that so many who call themselves environmentalists are campaigning against forestry when the alternative building materials are concrete, steel, plastic and more use of fossil fuels.

Dr. Patrick Moore PhD, co-founder of Greenpeace.

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity of commenting on the terms of reference.

The above quotation is from a man who was open-minded enough to realise that environmentalists are just as capable as the rest of us of misjudgement. Although he co-founded Greenpeace he came to the realisation that committed conservationists are not always right. He now spends much of his time trying to convince the world of the virtues of harvesting our forest resources.

I have never worked in the timber industry nor at any time received any pecuniary gain from it or from any association with it. When I was a small boy my father worked for a local sawmill for several years so my sustenance in that time was a benefit for which I am grateful, but that remains my only personal connection to the industry.

The first 20 years of my life were spent at Mathoura and now that I no longer work as a journalist I have returned to my home town.

My father's employment engendered a keen appreciation of the local forest, one that has stayed with me. I think I am an impartial observer of the forest, its management and its wildlife.

I welcome the assessment because for too long there has been a great misunderstanding, particularly in the remote cities, of both the river red gum forests and of forestry. Your study gives us a great opportunity to have an independent evaluation of them.

You will find, I am sure, that people in our cities are being fed misinformation about the management of these forests.

They have been told logging is being conducted illegally when such is not the case. In fact the logging is a highly regulated process which has positive benefits for both the forests and the people of the state of New South Wales.

They have been told the forests are being clear-felled. You have already had the opportunity of seeing that such is not the case.

They are being told the Superb parrot is in danger when it has been reliably demonstrated that most of their nesting sites are in close proximity to watercourses which are protected from harvesting. All other known nesting trees are also protected. There is recent evidence from reliable bird-watching groups that there has been a recent increase in sightings.

You need to take into account the evolutionary history of the forests on the Murray flood plain.

There is a growing body of research that points to the forests as we now know them being of very recent origin.

It is not disputed that the Cadell uplift, which recent research says took place 60,000 years ago, created the present delta on which the Barmah-Millewa group of forests grow.

Dr Tim Stone has shown in *The late-Holocene origin of the modern Murray River course, southeastern Australia* (2007) that the Barmah choke is less than 550 years old. Prior to that the area occupied by the Barmah forest and much of the Millewa and Moira forests was subject to at least frequent inundation and was more like a shallow lake fed by the Murray than the wetlands it had become by the time of white settlement. Trees cannot grow under such conditions.

Add to that the observations of the early squatter Edward Corr (*Recollections of Squatting in*

Victoria) that the river near Barmah flowed between extensive reedbeds interspersed with a few trees and his contention that the aboriginal population 50 years before he arrived in 1841 had been perhaps six or seven times as great but was reduced by smallpox and other disease and it can be seen that trees along the river were far more sparse than they are today. Regular burning by the aborigines, also noted by Curr, maintained a very open woodland by killing the young seedlings. From a solitary gum near the river he observed:

“A sea of reeds, of several miles in extent, as far in fact as the eye could reach, met our view on both sides...”

Even after the Murray broke through to join the Goulburn, the entire area was flooded regularly such that Charles Sturt during his 1838 cattle drive to Adelaide was persuaded by local aborigines at the effluence of the Edward river that he should cross the Murray because of the flooded conditions he would face if he managed to cross the Edward. He too described vast areas of reeds and noted evidence of aboriginal burning.

Sturt's and Curr's observation are matched by a letter written from the paddle-steamer *Lady Augusta* on her maiden voyage up the Murray. Sir Henry Young wrote to his Victorian counterpart Charles La Trobe:

“The river for 40 miles approaching Swan Hill, and for 20 miles beyond it, presents the most singular aspect which it is possible to conceive—a vast plain of reeds, without visible high land of any kind, or trees; the river-course perfectly safe, open, and deep (3 and 3½ fathoms); occasionally a fringe of high trees, and then another vast plain, entirely bare and open, with large lakes.”

Today, as you are aware from your inspection of the Nyah-Vinifera forest the banks of that stretch of river are also densely treed with river red gums, such is the invasive nature of the species.

These forests have been logged for almost 150 years. There is no doubt that they now contain more trees than at any previous time in their history. Logging is carried out in less than five percent of the forest area each year. If you take into account the many trees growing in or adjacent to the multitude of dry watercourses (“runners” in local parlance) which are protected from logging even though they carry water only during a flood, the actual area harvested is probably less than two percent. These protected runners, along with existing national parks and other reserves probably ensure that these forests already meet the national criteria for comprehensive, adequate and representative reserves of the species.

During all the time they have been logged, these forests have provided railway sleepers for New South Wales, Victoria and more recently South Australia. In fact in the 19th century they even helped build the Indian railway network. Yet railway sleepers are only part of what they produce. As long ago as 1889 the Deniliquin *Pastoral Times* commented in an article on the Millewa forest:

“...It grows, apparently, as fast as it is cut, in fact the cutting and recovering of timber from these State forests under proper supervision, seems to make that which remains grow more luxuriantly than ever.”

In addition to the well documented aboriginal occupation, the forests have now acquired significant white heritage.

Many local families have been involved in one way or another with the forests and with forestry for several generations.

I would suggest that their affinity with the trees far outweighs the misinformed wishes of those whose pressure on the government brought about this inquiry.

David Joss