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SUBMISSION BY TCA INTO THE VEAC RIVER RED GUM FORESTS INVESTIGATION

Talk of Redgum forests and images of Australia's heritage come to mind. Paddle steamers carrying goods along the river, pastoralists grazing sheep and cattle and timber cutters harvesting the timber to build wharves and bridges, milling it into sleepers with the smaller wood feeding the boilers on the paddle steamers.

This romantic image of Australia's is something that most people believe to be part of our history yet many of these images are still part of the Redgum forests of today. Paddle steamers now attract tourists to the river, and are still burning redgum. The durability of this unique timber for construction has meant that many of the structures built from redgum are only now requiring maintenance or replacement, with redgum timber being the preferred choice.

Sleepers are still cut from redgum and are vastly superior to concrete sleepers when carbon storage and energy usage in production are factored into the equation. With its beautiful colour and features, redgum timber has been prized by furniture makers and more recent developments has seen new technologies utilised to allow for even greater use of redgum timber.

History has shown us that Redgum forests are extremely robust. With disturbance from Indigenous people a regular event in the forest history and with the opening up of inland Australia by European settlers the redgum forests have managed to not only survive but grow. The people who over several generations have accessed the forests to make a living have become forest stewards and oversee the forest management to ensure that it will be available as a source of employment to future generations.

Many of the towns throughout the investigation area have become dependent on the forest to ensure their economic livelihoods. Changes to forest tenure will have disastrous effects on these communities. As we have seen in previous VEAC inquiries the promise of tourism replacing traditional employment has yet to be achieved. In the Otways and the Box and Ironbark forests the projected tourism bonanza is yet to arrive.

Too often timber communities are traded off to appease city voters. To them it is easy to support the locking up of forests because it has no impact on their lives yet it gives them the satisfaction that they are helping the environment (or so they are led to believe)

There is a real chance that if science and socio economic impacts are looked at with a balanced view and not an ill informed emotional outlook that hopefully VEAC will deliver an outcome which will ensure the continuation of harvesting a timber that is as Australian as the people that depend upon it for their future.

REDGUM FORESTS – THE FUTURE

Timber Communities Australia believes that the Redgum forests of the Murray Catchment could be used as an example to the rest of the world how forest use and the environment can be successfully merged to result in a win for all parties concerned. To declare the Redgum forest as Heritage forest and allow traditional forest use to continue is a path TCA would like to see VEAC follow.

To do this several issues would need to be addressed.

INDIGENOUS INVOLVEMENT

The recognition of indigenous stewardship of the Redgum forests is something TCA recognises. Unfortunately the Yorta Yorta tribe, it seems has been manipulated by green groups and as such want the forest locked up. TCA has made several attempts to hold discussions with the Yorta Yorta Advisory Body formed by DSE and the State Government but to no avail. If this Advisory Body is to be successful then open dialogue with all forest users must be achieved otherwise VEAC and the State Government must see the Yorta Yorta's claims as bias and one-sided towards the green rhetoric.

TCA sits on the board of the National Indigenous Forestry Scheme and wishes to see the full potential of indigenous peoples realised by creating forest projects that recognise their understanding of the land and deliver real employment opportunities.

TIMBER PRODUCTION

The properties of Redgum timber make it a timber that holds a place in all parts of the timber market. At the high value end is the furniture. Most people would have marvelled at the texture and feel of a carefully crafted piece of redgum furniture. The beautiful red colouring makes redgum distinct from other wood.

Many construction timbers are still sourced from redgum. The reconstruction of the historic Echuca Port will require redgum to be used to retain its historic value. Sleepers are also a product of redgum timber and far outweigh any other replacement products. There are few products that can match redgum for its durability and its environmental credentials in the carbon storing/creating debate.

Kiln drying has allowed redgum to be used for flooring and technological advances have seen redgum timber utilised for veneer.

Firewood is an extremely important part of the industry. With the cessation of larger commercial operations in the Box and Ironbark forests the demand for good slow burning timber rests almost entirely on redgum. Thinnings operations have allowed for smaller harvested wood to be utilised in the firewood market and supply the strong demand in the cities and suburbs. Woodchips are produced from any waste timber which is used for landscaping purposes. This maximization of redgum allows for redgum timber production to have almost no waste product.

The uniqueness of Redgum sees it placed in a market position few timbers have. To fully utilise this wonderful Australian timber in the marketplace a branding system could be awarded for it outlining its environmental and socio economic credentials.

The access to the forest for fire fighting is something that is taken for granted. Many of the roads are maintained and kept open by timber harvesters and local contractors assist by committing heavy machinery in the event of a fire. Many timber workers are also members of local fire fighting crews and any decision that will have a negative impact on timber jobs will also have a flow on effect to fire fighting capabilities to communities in the area.

TCA believes that the redgum timber industry is an essential part of the economy of the investigation area. The historical links to the industry clearly demonstrate that this is a long term industry and that past management techniques have allowed for the industry to develop in a sustainable manner. It should be noted that the forests where harvesting occurs are not disappearing. It is the clearing of land for agriculture that has diminished the forest area.

Efforts should go into continuation of this heritage industry. If VEAC finds it necessary to make any changes to the way the industry operates it should only do so if a full and proper costing is undertaken into the implications of any adverse decisions

GRAZING

The timber industry and grazing have co existed in the forest since European settlement. As with any good land managers graziers have ensured stock numbers have been kept in check.

Like the timber industry, cattle grazing on public land, has been in the sights of environmentalists for many years. The use of the current drought situation by zealot groups such as the VNPA to shift the focus on to grazing and timber is nothing short of disgraceful. Their use of emotive debates to distract people from scientific fact is a trap I hope VEAC will not fall into.

TOURISM/RECREATIONAL POTENTIAL

The creation of the Otways National Park after the VEAC investigation was supposed to have seen tourism fill in the void created with the closure of the industry. The Fly walk in the Lavers Hill area was projected to bring thousands of visitors and create many jobs. This is far from the case, with visitor numbers so low that many of the staff have been hours reduced or been laid off.

Results in the Box and Ironbark forests are not much better. The kiosk that was established at Whroo is closed due to low visitor numbers and looks set to fall back into disrepair. Waranga basin, touted as the tourist destination for water recreation is now being used to supply water to Bendigo and Ballarat and once again people in rural areas will miss out on a chance of a vibrant economy to appease an insatiable city vote.

TCA believes that the Redgum forests have enormous tourism potential. This cannot replace existing industries and should be developed in a manner that informs and educates the general public of the story of the whole redgum forest.

The closeness of the links can be best shown through the amount of visitors to Arburthnots sawmill in Koondrook. Visitors are given a tour of a working mill and see first hand the value adding that occurs with redgum. They are also shown the high grade furniture produced and explained the importance of the industry to the socio economic well being of the town. This demonstrates how well both tourism and timber can be combined

Guided forest tours to visit harvesting areas and learn about forest management could be a job opportunity for indigenous people. The annual cattle muster has huge tourist potential, being one of the last bush musters; it has a special historical significance that would attract people to the event.

TCA Easter clean up in the forest has given our members a chance to discuss forest management issues with campers, the majority who wish the forest not to be turned into a national park.

TCA believes tourism is not a stand alone industry but the continuation of heritage industries could see the realisation of the redgum forests full tourism potential. The socio economic strengths of communities that have several key industries far outweigh those dependent on just one industry.

WATER, WOOD AND WILDLIFE

For expertise comments on this matter I would suggest that VEAC should refer to the work done by Barrie Dexter and Mark Poynter.

There has yet to be any quantified evidence put forward to support the fallacy of timber harvesting causing species expectation. There is more evidence showing the contrary with many of our rarer fauna species being found in areas of disturbance.

Water is the lifeblood of the Redgum forests and TCA supports Barrie Dexter's proposals as outlined in Water, Wood and Wildlife part 2.

TCA believes that management of flooding needs to be better understood and regulated by the responsible authorities. The pumping of water into forests during the summer period is a waste. Flooding needs to occur in conjunction with natural river cycles.

What amazes me is the acceptance of man made forest interference by environmentalists if they believe it is of benefit to the forest yet any activity they are opposed to is condemned and portrayed as damaging to the environment.

TCA believes that any environmental decisions need to be based on sound science and research, not determined using emotive arguments.

SOCIO ECONOMIC IMPACTS

People that in the rural areas of the state do not have the luxury of being able to gain employment as easily as their city cousins if job losses are forced upon them. In most cases when there is a major downturn in traditional employment the exodus of families begins and so does the inevitable impacts on local businesses and community infrastructure.

It is the effects on the smaller communities within the study area that is of greatest concern to TCA. The people that live in these communities were once seen as the backbone of the country and the importance of healthy rural industries understood by all. Unfortunately a divide has been placed between city and country values with people in rural Victoria feeling they are nothing but political pawns.

Decisions are made that have adverse effects on rural communities and no impacts on city people, all too often resulting in towns that cannot provide future employment positions for the young. What is becoming more evident is a whole generation of rural kids being forced to move into suburban areas in search of jobs and the traditional family links being destroyed.

The relationship between city and country is wider now. In previous generations there was always a city cousin that would visit or you would stay with ensuring a greater understanding of city country issues. With population growth we are seeing a generation of people that have no connection with the country and think that eggs come from the supermarket shelves or that wood comes from Bunnings. It is this generation that is being influenced politically and vote green thinking they are helping the environment with no understanding of the impacts on rural Victoria. It is also this group that politicians believe they need to appease and as such set policy that cuts deep into the livelihoods of rural Victorians.

TCA would like to see an investigation into the full socio economic impacts on Redgum communities. The negative impacts on towns in the Otways is a clear indicator that research needs to be carefully undertaken before making a final decision on the future of Redgum communities.

The millions of dollars that was spent in the Otways to construct the Fly walk as a tourism icon is beginning to look like wasted money with visitor numbers declining and people employed there being laid off.

The best scenario for the investigation area would be one that will deliver growth and prosperity. The longevity of these communities is testament to how well they have assimilated to this harsh environment. The valuable contributions made by these communities is too often overlooked. The way they have taken on a stewardship role and ensured the forests have been managed in such a way as to allow for continuous sustained use is something the communities should be rewarded for and not punished by restricting access to the forest they are dependant upon.

The downstream jobs being provided by the Redgum timber industry are continuing to expand with more and more furniture and cabinet makers being exposed to the distinctive colouring of Redgum. The quality of this Redgum furniture is something that cannot be replaced by any other wood from within Australia or overseas. It should be our responsibility as good global citizens to encourage the use of timbers sourced from Victorias sustainably managed forests including the Redgum forests.

When we talk of preserving forests it should never be at the expense of forest dependant communities and the socio economic factors in making any decision need to be carefully and thoroughly explored so the implications can be understood and factored into the decision making process.

SUMMARY

It is somewhat disappointing to read a supposed unbiased document and come away feeling that the only thing on the agenda for Redgum forests is a national park. It is the constant use of terminology that portrays rural industries in a bad light. The document inviting submissions has an example of this suggestive writing. There is a paragraph in the Message from Council that claims that 'the region has seen major environmental devastation including the collapse of the Murray Cod fishery and the deforestation of the floodplains for agriculture, to fuel paddle steamers and to supply railway transport'. This style of writing would lead people to the conclusion that the last redgum tree is about to be cut down and is an underhanded way of swaying public opinion to favour a green outcome. This is just one example that sets a tone for the whole book.

In past decisions VEAC has shown little regard for the implications of its outcomes. Before the investigation continues there needs to be measures put in place to investigate the failure of VEAC decisions into delivering any of the alleged positive outcomes they have put forward for displaced forest workers.

TCA would like to see VEAC consider its findings carefully realising they hold the future of hundreds of families in the investigation area in their hands. All considerations need to be balanced with people given the same recognition as flora and fauna. Balanced outcomes need to be found factoring in the human impacts into the equation and ensuring that the communities dependent on the Redgum forest be given a real chance of a future.

If you would like to discuss this issue further, please call me on 5962 1874 or mobile 0438 556 020. VEAC must remember that you hold the future of many families in your hand, please don't forget about the people.

Yours truly

SCOTT GENTLE
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