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The Editor, Deniliquin Pastoral Times

ConFest Visitors Deserve to Know the Truth About the Red Gum Forests

Easter welcomes the annual ConFest visitors to the Deniliquin and Moulamein districts. As usual, ConFest is held in amongst the river red gums of the Edward River.

The irony of the ConFest site should not be lost on the people of the Riverina whose communities will have their social fabric severely affected by the NSW Government's intention to change the status of vast areas of the region's river red gum forests to National Parks.

Visitors to ConFest will have the opportunity to remember the forests in their present state – stressed by drought but very much alive after recent rain and local flooding. They should take plenty of photos of these healthy red gum forests or copy photos from the ConFest web site. I would advise them to compare them in five to ten years time with the National Parks that the Government intends to replace the healthy Riverina red gum forestry industry with.

No doubt there will be overgrown and severely degraded "Parks" by then as the Government has failed to adopt the Natural Resources Commission's recommendations in their entirety. As NRC Chairman Dr John Williams feared during the late January community briefings, Environment Minister Frank Sartor has "cherry picked" the recommendations.

There is really only one recommendation that the Government did not accept but it was the keystone to the long-term survival of the forests; the need for a further 1.2 gigalitres of environmental water to be purchased for planned and sustainable flooding of the forests.

The NRC admitted that the Millewa forests were selected for National Parks as they were the easiest to flood and, consequently, contained the best quality timber. That admission bought no standing ovations from those present at the briefings and spelt the death knell for the local timber industry and the sustainability of communities dependant on the industry.

The Greens have targeted its anger at Minister Sartor's decision to phase out the timber industry over a 5 year period. Fundamentally, this political party does not want a timber industry anywhere so its reaction was to be expected. Surprisingly, I have read no comments from The Greens about the Government's failure to deliver the additional water.

There are two lines of thought as to the best action to bring these facts to the notice of the visiting public and to people from metropolitan areas. Protesting locally might be seen as preaching to the converted; public rallies in Sydney might get the message into metropolitan papers and the nightly news.

Highlighting the truth behind the plight of river red gum communities to ConFest visitors might also be seen as preaching to the converted although, in the eyes of many, converts to the green movement and anti-timber activism. Whatever the outcome, ConFest visitors can be assured that the NSW Government is hoodwinking you every bit as much as it has the Riverina river red gum forest communities.

Whatever your political beliefs, whether you support or detest the timber industry, what is left of the NRC River Red Gum Recommendations will not save the forests. If anything their demise will be fast-tracked.

I firmly believe that if organisations such as GECO (Goongerah Education Centre) can spread it factually-challenged messages about the East Gippsland timber industry at ConFest then it is quite legitimate for my organisation to tell the truth of the red gum forests and future National Parks to ConFest visitors.

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