

1st September, 2007

The Director
Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
8 Nicholson Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002

Dear Director

I have lived along the Murray River most of my life, and my family has had a continuous association with the Riverine Red Gum Forest for more than 100 years. We have camped, collected firewood, and ridden trail bikes and horses in the local bush, and many of my fondest memories and current traditions are associated with the forest.

I, like many people living along the Murray River are conservationists, and are fiercely protective of the forest and its long term future. We are all part of the biodiversity of the forest due to our close association, and we have co-existed with the bush for many generations.

I am extremely frustrated with the content of the Draft Proposal's Paper, which sets out major changes for the RRG forests. I am also disappointed that VEAC has not represented the views of DSE and its officers, considering that they are the people who are educated, trained and experienced in the management of red gum.

There has been growing frustration and discontent in rural Victoria since the release of the River Red Gum Forests Investigation Draft Proposal Paper, and I would like to express my concerns in this formal submission. I would like to highlight the following issues:

Debris

VEAC has recommended in the draft proposals paper that forest debris be increased from 20 to 45 tonne per hectare. We understand that this recommendation has been developed in order to increase the habitat for the yellow-footed antechinus in the red gum forests. This animal is not under threat of extinction, and is living and breeding extremely well in the red gum forest, and even in more open areas. They have even been relocated from people's back yards, where they were living quite happily. They obviously do not require large amounts of debris on the forest floor in order to survive, and therefore do not require the additional woody debris as recommended by VEAC.

Furthermore, the formal study on the antechinus and its habitat has not been completed, so I believe that your recommendations are premature and therefore should not be part of the VEAC report.

Your recommendation will result in the red gum forests looking like a rubbish dump. It will become too difficult to walk through the bush, and the additional debris will provide fuel for hot feral fires in summer. Your chairperson claimed at a public meeting that increased fuel loads will be managed through controlled burns, so what's the point in increasing the fuel loads to begin with. I reject this recommendation, and suggest that VEAC support the current level of forest debris at 20 tonne.



This photo was taken at the Nyah State Forest, which has **not** been actively managed for twelve years (due to the involvement of the 'Friends of Nyah and Vinifera Forest'). The forest debris is consistent with 10 – 20 tonnes. Imagine what it is going to look like when the debris is increased over time to 45 tonnes. People will not be able to walk through the forest, and the fuel loads will promote large 'feral' fires.

Thinning

River red gum requires a comprehensive and ongoing thinning program in order to ensure the long term health and viability of the bush. This practice is especially important in times of drought, otherwise competition forces will result in detrimental growth patterns. Changing the land use of the red gum forests, as proposed in the draft proposal paper, threatens this entire process.

VEAC has recommended that 'ecological thinning may be permitted'. How is this going to occur and who is going to fund this, considering that commercial thinning operations are not allowed in parks?

Riverine Red gum trees require water, nutrients and sunlight to grow. Competition forces through unchecked regeneration will result in a bush that it is full of small, skinny, dead and dying trees. You don't have to go far in order to see the evidence.



This photo (above) has been taken in the Nyah State Forest, and shows small, skinny trees that are trying hard to find some light.



This photo has also been taken in the Nyah State Forest and shows an overcrowded forest that has 30 years of growth. Competition forces has resulted in small, thin trees that will never grow to any appreciable size. They only trees that have a chance are those on the edge of the forest.

The draft proposals paper places a lot of emphasis upon flooding the bush in order to ensure the long term viability of the river red gum. If flooding doesn't occur, then there will need to be even more emphasis placed on thinning in order to ensure the long term health and viability of the bush.

Changing the land use of the State Forests to Parks, is therefore not only unnecessary, but will threaten the very trees that VEAC is trying to protect. I reject VEAC's recommendation to change the current land use of any of the Riverine Red Gum State Forests, and suggest that the Council begin listening to the relevant forest scientists and DSE staff who understand the needs of river red gum.

Wildfire

Wildfire is an ever present threat in Australia, with many communities located close to state forests and national parks. History has shown us the devastation associated with large 'feral' fires in areas that have not been actively managed. Look at the fires in Wilson's Promontory (2005) and the Grampians (2006), where large areas were devastated, where biodiversity was decimated, and where many wildlife and domestic animals suffered and died. National parks are not actively managed to a sufficient level in order to reduce fire risk, and are therefore a threat against the very biodiversity that they are mandated to protect.

State Forests are actively managed for fire risk through: thinning / commercial harvesting, weed programs, fuel reduction burns, and road maintenance. It is interesting to note that the 800 hectare fire in the Barmah State Park (2006) raced out of control until it entered the adjoining 'thinned' State Forest, where it was successfully extinguished. A decrease in thinning practises and a corresponding increase in woody debris on the forest floor will be a recipe for disaster.

I reject VEAC's recommendation to change the current land use of the State Forests along the entire length of the Murray River, and suggest that State Forests be appropriately resourced in order to 'ramp up' their programs in order to decrease wildfire risk across Victoria.

Grazing

Grazing has been common practise in the red gum forests since the 1800s. Domestic agistment in the forest has provided additional fodder for animals, extra income for farmers, and employment opportunities for local communities. Grazing has been used successfully to reduce the risk of fires through the reduction of forest fuels, as well as the removal of weeds as well.

Jacqui Kelly stated in the Guardian Newspaper that "The friends [Friends of Nyah Vinifera Forest] are going to weed the forest". She went on to say that "We've had a few box-thorn days and Clean Up Australia Day, but we've been really busy". Local green groups weeding the state forest is not only inappropriate, but is a risk to the biodiversity of the bush as well.

I understand that some areas of the bush should not be grazed, however those areas could be actively managed to exclude grazing. It is possible to find a balance, without changing the land use of the forest.

Camping

I reject VEAC's recommendation to turn red gum state forests into National Parks. Under the proposed recommendations campers will not be able to have a solid fuel fire in a national park and/or a nature conservation reserve at any time of the year. This will have a direct effect upon the camping experience and the number of campers, resulting in a decline in local economies.

The VEAC chairperson stated at a public forum that changing the land use of State Forests to National Parks "will not decrease the number of campers". This is simply not true as ad-hoc discussions with campers have told us that they will not return if they cannot have a fire. VEAC Council members do not live in our area and are not talking to the very people that camp in the bush.

The decline in camping will result in a significant decline in the economies of the local communities. There has been no reference to this impact in the VEAC report, and the VEAC chairperson stated at a public forum that "there will be no impact".

The same chairperson also stated that day trippers will frequent our area. This is ludicrous. People will not travel 3 – 5 hours one way in order to go for a walk in the bush. We do not have any iconic areas (such as waterfalls or cliffs) to draw day trippers. We do not see any day trippers in our bush now, so why does VEAC believe that they are going to come in the future?

Local people have camped in the bush for generations. They all have their favourite camping spot, and they treat the bush and other campers with respect. An increase in national parks will change this experience forever. Other national parks enforce strict regulations around camping, dictating where and when people can camp and some charge fees as well. Is this the future for our bush?

I reject VEAC's proposal to change the land use of the Riverine Red Gum to National, Regional and/or Other Parks, and suggest that the current land use remain as State Forests.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity has thrived and survived in the Riverine Red Gum Forests, even during the extreme drought conditions experienced over the last twelve years. There are many protection zones in place in State Forests in order to protect plants and wildlife, and there are many government departments and employees that are funded to ensure the viability of biodiversity for many years to come.

All the people who live along the Murray River and who interact with the bush are part of the biodiversity of the forest as well. The VEAC report, however, does not acknowledge this. There needs to be a balance with regard to biodiversity, where native flora and habitat are not considered more important than people.

There is no need to change the land use of State Forests in order to promote and/or protect biodiversity, as management practices are already in place. The VEAC report even states that 'State Forests support biodiversity'. I reject VEAC's proposal to change State Forests to National, Regional and/or Other Parks and suggest that the Council begin to promote a more balanced approach for our forests with regard to biodiversity.

Co-Management

VEAC proposes co-management in certain sections of the 'Investigation Area', with traditional owners making up the majority of members. Co-management (whether with Aboriginal, green or community groups) has been 'tried' in other areas of the state, including the Wombat State Forest. After two years of co-management the group was disbanded, and the whole experience was branded as unsuccessful. When the Chairperson of VEAC was asked how he proposed co-management in the Riverine Red Gum was going to work, he was unable to answer this question.

The Chairperson also stated that there would be an 'advisory group' set up for the Guttrum State Forest, although this was not stated in the Proposals Paper. When the Chairperson was asked why this wasn't in the draft proposals paper for the public to comment on, he stated that not everything was in the document. Why is this the case?, and what else has not been put into the draft paper?

VEAC has placed so much emphasis upon traditional ownership in the River Red Gum Forests Investigation Report, however they have neglected to consider the traditions of 'bush users' since the time of settlement. People living along the Murray River have used the bush for generations. They have harvested timber, camped, walked their dogs, ridden their horses and bikes, grazed their animals and hunted in the bush.

I agree that areas should be protected if they are culturally significant, but what about our traditions? When are we going to count?

Many thousands of people have had a close association with the RRG forest for many generations, and we deserve a right to be considered in the VEAC report. The Council needs to find a balance between traditional ownership and our rights as well.

Many 'traditional owners' have not had a continuous association with the red gum forest, unlike many locals, and they do not have the knowledge or experience to manage the red gum.

I do not agree with the recommendation of co-management and urge VEAC to leave Riverine Red Gum in the hands of educated and experienced forest scientists and managers, and continue current practises of consulting with local Aborigines regarding areas of cultural significance.

Commercial timber harvesting

Commercial timber harvesting has been undertaken in the Riverine Red Gum Forests for many generations. Red Gum is a renewable resource, providing sleepers for railway tracks, heritage timbers for ports and bridges, fuel for warmth and cooking, general timber for construction and gardens, timeless furniture and gifts, and mulch to decrease water use. Commercial harvesting also promotes a healthy multi-aged forest through selected thinning operations, and provides employment and economic growth for local communities.

The VEAC report recommends a large scale decrease in the timber industry without considering the enormity of its recommendations.

Many red gum mills have timber contracts with the State and Local Governments. How are they going to meet these contracts, and what will the government use in the place of the red gum product?

Timber royalties are currently used for forest road maintenance and bridge building / maintenance, which improves access to the bush for recreation and fire management. Where will the funding come from in the future in order to thin the forest and maintain access to the bush?

Forest scientists and forest managers have provided information to VEAC during the investigation process. The draft proposals paper, however, does not reflect the views of these people, totally discounting the science and local knowledge of how to grow a healthy red gum forest, and how to use it in a sustainable way.

Why hasn't VEAC listened to the government's resource managers, and why hasn't VEAC listened to the forest scientists? The report is extremely one sided, and has caused a great deal of frustration. VEAC may be situated at the DSE building in Melbourne, but this is seemingly the only input that DSE has had into the development of the proposed recommendations.

There are various anomalies in the VEAC report with regard to sustainability. Did VEAC meet with DSE prior to publishing the proposal's paper in order to ensure that the information was correct? If not, then why not?

I urge VEAC to begin listening to the forest scientists and managers, and to undertake a fair investigation of sustainable harvesting practises.

Choice Modelling

Choice modelling was used to estimate the protection values associated with the Riverine Red Gum Forests. It was interesting to note that within the red gum region, 'respondents recorded values that are not significantly different from zero' (page 79 of the draft proposals paper), and 'were prepared to accept the status quo'. This indicates that people living near the red gum forests understand the management requirements of red gum, as opposed to those living in Melbourne and Bairnsdale who were also surveyed. Why were people in these areas surveyed? These people do not understand the red gum environment, and would be unaffected by VEAC's proposed recommendations.

VEAC mislead the survey process by asking respondents what they would pay for a 1,000 hectare increase in the area of healthy RRG forest (per annum per household for 20 years). The questioning indicated that the forest would only become healthy with a change of land use (i.e., formation of parks). I conduct many surveys in my private employment and business, and I was totally disgusted with the style of surveying and the 'Choice Modelling' used by VEAC. It was inappropriate, unprofessional and misleading.

VEAC has stated that their 'proposed recommendations would result in a net increase in economic value to Victoria of \$92 million excluding the costs of environmental water' (page ix). This a hypothetical figure based upon the choice modelling survey, not upon 'actual income'. For instance, people from Melbourne and Bairnsdale did not give their credit card numbers when they completed the surveys.

Local green groups have been using this figure (\$92 million) in their campaign, saying that there will be a net benefit of \$92 million to the area if VEAC's recommendations are accepted. VEAC needs to understand the consequences of using such a survey model, and how the outcomes can be inappropriately interpreted.

VEAC has also not fully counted the costs of increasing the number of national parks. They have stated that 'there will be no net recreation and tourism benefits or costs associated with their recommendations' (page 80). This is untrue as campers are already stating that they will not return to the Riverine Red Gum Forests if the land use is changed to national parks (i.e., if they can't have campfires). The VEAC Chairperson stated at a public forum that he refuses to believe that there will be a reduction in camping with their recommendations. Who is VEAC talking to and listening to?

VEAC has failed to consider the costs of maintaining roads and bridges, and the comprehensive thinning programmes that would be required to keep the new parks 'healthy'. These costs are currently being met through royalties from the timber industry. Who will fund these activities if the RRG Forests are changed to national, regional and other parks, and why didn't VEAC count these costs in their draft proposals paper?

Have the full economic costs associated with an 80% reduction in the timber industry been counted in the survey process as well? I think not!

The Choice Modelling undertaken as part of the investigation has been flawed and misleading, and has delivered the green movements with a \$92m soap box to stand on.

I completely reject the Choice Modelling Survey conducted by VEAC and urge that the information be deleted from the investigation and an apology issued to all of the communities along the Murray River for using such a flawed approach.

Economic / Social Decline

There is going to be widespread economic decline as a result of VEAC's recommendations. They have stated that there will be an 'estimated loss of 80% of the River Red Gum timber industry (page 83), with a corresponding loss of local income and employment, running into the loss of millions of dollars in output, income, value-adding and employment.

VEAC has stated that 'the towns of Cohuna, Koondrook, Nathalia and Picola are likely to be the most sensitive to any job losses (and potential population losses)' as a result of their recommendations (page 85).

VEAC has also stated, that 'At an individual level there are also a range of potential impacts of the loss of employment for individuals and their families including poverty and financial hardship, reduced future work opportunities, reduced participated in mainstream community life, strains in family relationships, and intergenerational welfare dependency'

All this for what reason?

The forest scientists and forest managers know and understand the Riverine Red Gum Forest, and know that the bush can be utilized on a sustainable basis.

So why is VEAC proposing an 80% decrease in the timber industry, and a corresponding increase in poverty and dependency? It doesn't make any sense.

Areas along the Murray River are already seriously affected by drought, with the dairy and food industries on the verge of total devastation. Many farmers have been told that they will only receive 5-10% of their water allocation. People are selling their cows, selling their water and are now looking for work. I have a business in Koondrook, Echuca and Bendigo, and I have been shocked by the number of clients who have either sold their cattle or water, or plan to do so in the near future. Anxiety and depression is escalating in our communities, as is the growing feeling of 'no hope for the future'.

VEAC has stated that 'most of the costs [of their recommendations] will be captured in the study area'. This means that rural people will wear the costs of VEAC's recommendations. They also state that 'most of the benefits will be enjoyed by people living outside of the study area', for instance in Melbourne. This seems to be a current government trend. The Labour Government plans to secure Melbourne's water future by taking the first 75 gL from the Goulburn / Murray system.

Whether it's water or the forest, Melbourne seems to reap all the benefits.

Decreasing the timber industry (for no sound scientific reason) will not only add to the widespread demise of local economies, but will add to the growing discontent with the current Labour government, VEAC and the green movements. I urge that VEAC scrap their recommendations, as rural Victoria cannot absorb the cost.

Water

VEAC has recommended that 4,000 gL be used to flood the bush, in order to increase the health of the RRG forest. Yes we are in a drought, but this is not a new phenomenon, and the bush has been in a drought before. I agree that the RRG would benefit from a flood, however this is not totally necessary, as a return of wet conditions can be a satisfactory solution for the red gum's survival.

There has been a lot of debate around how the forest can be flooded. I asked the VEAC Chairperson at a public forum how their Council proposes to get the 4,000 gL over the banks, and he stated that they did not know. Flooding the RRG would require both the Goulburn and Murray Rivers to be running at a high level, before the 4,000 gL could be released.

If the Goulburn and Murray Rivers are running high, then don't you think that we may actually be having a 'wet season'? 4,000 gL is a huge amount of water. Where is this going to come from and who is going to pay for it? How is it going to move down the length of the Goulburn and Murray River satisfactorily? Furthermore won't the small towns and farms along the Murray River be at risk of flooding when the 4,000 gL is released?

An alternative flooding mechanism was suggested during the consultation period, where a weir pool located at Murrabit could help to artificially raise the level of the Murray River in a controlled manner, in order to help flood the bush.

This was dismissed by the consultants, however they did state afterwards that a weir pool would work but would not be considered as “***the greenies wouldn't like it***”.

What is going on? Who is VEAC listening to?

I reject the recommendations put forth by VEAC for flooding, and suggest that the government undertakes a proper evaluation of water requirements and operations.

Interests

I would like to know whose interests will be served through the outcomes of the VEAC recommendations.

- It is not the railways, people or organisations who own heritage assets, as they won't be able to undertake repairs.
- It is not the home owners who wish to heat their houses and cook their dinner.
- It is not the garden owners who wish to use mulch that is resistant to termites.
- It is not the campers, as they will be subjected to restricted use of the bush and a 'dispersal strategy'.
- It is not Victoria, as extra funding will be needed to manage, maintain and thin the new parks.
- It is not the red gum forest, as changing the land use will result in an overcrowded bush, full of thin, dead and dying trees.
- It is not bush users, as they will be severely restricted in how they use the bush.
- It is not the fire fighters as they will need to fight the increased number of 'feral' fires in the parks.
- It is not biodiversity, as weeds and fires will decrease the wildlife and flora in the bush.
- It is not the local people, as they will decline into poverty and depression.

So, what positive outcomes will result from the proposed recommendations? Whose interests will be served? Who will benefit? Which people? Which green groups? Tell us what really lies behind the decisions of VEAC!!!!

VEAC members do not live along the Murray River, with most of the Council members living in Melbourne. These people are proposing to change the lives of the locals forever, all with the stroke of a pen.

Conclusion

Rural people are unselfish and patient. They take what they have and try to make a 'go of it'. They love the land and know the bush, and treat both with respect. They accept change if there is sound reason for it.

Will the resultant poverty and the long term decline in the health of the Riverine Red Gum Forests be worth it?

I reject the entire 'River Red Gum Forests Investigation Draft Proposals Paper', and urge the government to begin considering 'balance and sustainability' as the driving forces for change.

The green vote is just not worth it!

PAULINE THORSON

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