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Submission on the 'Crown Lands Legislation White Paper'

Introduction

The Clarence Environment Centre has maintained a shop front presence in Grafton for more than a quarter of a century, and have a proud record of environmental advocacy, always placing the well-being of our unique plant and animal life ahead of inappropriate development.

Preamble

Forests are an amazing collection of millions of life forms that make up what we refer to today as biodiversity, which provides mankind with the basic elements without which we could not exist, oxygen to breathe, and clean water to drink. Biodiversity provides us with everything we eat, much of what we wear, and the medicines that keep us safe from disease.

These ecoservices are provided to us absolutely free, yet traditionally, when valuing those forests, governments have failed to place any dollar value on those services, seeing forest values only in terms of timber production or tourism, or licence fees from recreational pursuits such as hunting.

What would it cost to mechanically separate the oxygen from carbon dioxide and safely sequester the carbon for centuries? What would it cost for additional filtration of all the water we use, if forests had not undertaken the task on our behalf at no cost at all? What would it cost to design and build dozens of fire resistant nest boxes, install and maintain them for two hundred years, a function provided for tree-hollow dependent wildlife by a single old-growth tree?

These functions and more go to make up the millions of dollars worth of ecoservices provided by every hectare of forest annually, that we enjoy at no cost whatsoever.

Yet, in compiling the Crown Lands Legislation White Paper, the Government has completely failed to recognise the significance of those services, and focused purely on the dollars and jobs that are generated through the exploitation of those forests that is slowly destroying them.

The vast percentage of our crown lands are made up from national parks and state forests that cover millions of hectares and consist mainly of forests, much of it having high conservation values which should be protected and enhanced. Instead, the focus of the White Paper is exploitation.

In early 2013, the Upper House Inquiry into the management of crown lands in NSW, which was the precursor to the White Paper, toured the state undertaking hearings at various centres.

The Clarence Environment Centre provided comment at one such hearing in Grafton, and it was clear that the current Government committee members, Liberal and National, with support from the Shooters and Fishers Party, were focused on extending activities such as logging, grazing, hunting, and even mining into national parks.

There was even the unthinkable suggestion that logged state forests could be exchanged for more pristine national parks to allow them to be similarly trashed. One supposedly intelligent MLC asked, *“If you bulldoze a forest to undertake a development, and plant another forest of the same size elsewhere, what is the difference?”* Our response that the difference would be about 200 to 300 years seemed to completely baffle him. Clearly he had no concept of what a healthy ecosystem is, or the time-frames involved in creating old-growth, a stage that needs to be reached for a fully operating ecosystem to evolve. It is exactly that level of thinking that has led to the formulation of the Crown Lands Legislation White Paper, which we are now asked to comment on.

‘Crown Lands Legislation White Paper’

It has to be recognised that a large percentage of Australia's remaining native forests, particularly on the Tablelands and western slopes and plains, lie within crown lands, state forests, national parks and conservation reserves, including world heritage areas. Even the vast network of travelling stock routes contain significant areas of woodlands, and wetlands that provide linkages between larger forested areas along which native birds and animals can migrate in relative safety.

What the White Paper would like to see is more exploitation of those dwindling areas of forest such as the current disgraceful Government approved destruction of the Leard and Pilliga State Forests for coal and gas mining. Anything that is left can be chopped down and fed into polluting electricity generators. Those decisions to destroy much of what remains of the natural vegetation and wildlife habitat in the Central West will undoubtedly see some species become extinct in the region.

Even in urban areas, small crown land reserves provide important remnant vegetation, critical stepping stones across the landscape to assist the survival of resident, itinerant and migratory birds and animals. Crown lands also protect social and cultural values, and provide opportunities for low impact recreation, education and scientific research. Hunting, off-road motor sports, and other high impact activities, that destroy native habitats have no place in these sensitive ecosystems, and should never be allowed, particularly on crown land.

We are deeply concerned that the Review has failed to identify the key public benefits provided by crown lands, with no environmental, cultural or social assessment of those assets. The proposed objects of the new legislation do not even include the protection of high conservation values, or at any stage incorporate the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development. Instead it appears crown land is there for exploitation, with no consideration of the negative impacts that will result.

We strongly believe that all crown land must have a plan of management that identifies and protects environmental, heritage and social values, including natural resource management requirements to ensure accountability and transparency in Crown land management for the benefit of all living entities. This should apply to all public land, regardless of tenure, including council parks, commons and trusts.

We thank you for this opportunity to comment, and hope that common sense prevails, and serious steps are taken to conserve what little native vegetation we have left, in the best possible condition.

Yours sincerely
John Edwards
Honorary Secretary