

Submission from the West Wellington Protection Group to the Senate enquiry into government moves to reduce the size of the Tasmanian World Heritage Area

7 March 2014

The West Wellington Protection Group (WWPG) strongly opposes the Australian Government's proposal to remove 74,000 hectares of forests from the Tasmanian World Heritage listing. We welcome the chance to state our opposition publicly in Hobart on Monday 31st March to the Senate Inquiry.

When the boundaries for the original WHA were drawn, many of the productive valleys (such as the Weld and Picton) were excluded owing to their logging potential. That these areas have since been affected by logging activity does not detract from their World Heritage Value. Such regions are home to some of the tallest trees in the world and also to tracts of slow-growing temperate rainforest, rare outside Tasmania. It is vital for ecosystem and biodiversity regeneration that whole regions are protected, rather than a patchwork of apparently unlogged areas.

The Current Australian Government's claim that the area under question is substantially degraded is misleading. Peter Hitchcock, a prominent expert on World Heritage, states that the great majority of what is proposed to be excised – about 90% - has not been disturbed. Roughly about 5-6% of the areas proposed to be excised would have been logged since 1960. The World Heritage committee were made aware of the presence of past logging disturbance in the nominated area.

Furthermore, the 2013 additions to the Tasmanian WHA were drawn up as an integral part of an overarching agreement between broad, representative swathes of both the forestry sector and that of conservationists. This agreement represents an historical compromise between two factions that have been in conflict for generations. As well as the extension to the WHA, a further 170,000 hectares of state forest were earmarked for protection from logging; saw log quotas were drastically reduced via a buy-back scheme so as to reduce the overall intensity of logging in Tasmania, and large sums of federal money were released in order to manage the protected forests and to kick start or grow other more sustainable industries. The package also included substantial sums to enable forestry contractors to exit the industry and to re-train for other professions.

To wind back on the WHA extensions in 2014 would jeopardise the compromise reached and negate the years of negotiations that took place to reach this point. It would also be a betrayal and a breach of trust, ie to enable money to flow to buy-back quotas and enable contractors to leave the forestry industry – whilst taking away an integral part of the conservation outcomes. The result would inevitably lead to greater activism, not just from those environmental groups who fought for greater environmental benefits from the agreement, but also from people who were prepared to accept a compromise for the greater good.

Maintaining the WHA extensions can only be good for Tasmania. It means that unique ecosystems will be protected for future generations and that conflict between the forestry industry and

environmentalists will be minimised. For those that think the world is not watching – think again. Many UK newspapers and colour supplements have featured glowing accounts of the beauty of Tasmania and its many attractions, most focusing on its wonderful wilderness scenery. A brand built on the protection of our forest heritage will inevitably lead to greater tourism income over the years – a considerably more sustainable income than that from clear-fell forestry.

We should not forget that the developed world is moving away from broad-scale logging to help address the issue of global warming. As a country with so much to lose from climate change, Australia needs to do everything it can to sequester carbon for years to come. There will also be future international agreements from which Tasmania can benefit – ie carbon credits from maintaining its forestry estate. John Kerry, US Secretary of State, recently noted that climate change is as much an international emergency as terrorism or poverty.

West Wellington Protection Group