

Inquiry into forestry and mining operations on the Tiwi Islands

Submission from Hugh Kneebone

Dear Committee members

Thank you for this opportunity to address the terms of reference in relation the Senate Committees enquiry into activities on the Tiwi Islands. My interest in this enquiry stems from time spent living with my family in Nguiu (pop.1500) on Bathurst Island from May 2006 until April 2007. During this time my wife worked in a community development role based in the Tiwi Islands Local Government (TILG) whilst our three young boys (12, 9, 6) attended the local Catholic primary school in combination with home schooling supported by the Katherine School of the Air. I was on a years leave without pay from a position in the SA Department for Environment and Heritage and volunteered my time and services across a range of areas in the local community. I hold a Bachelor of Environmental Management and am currently a Manager with the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resource Management Board.

Our time on the Islands was in considerable contrast to our life here in Adelaide. Our TILG house was located in the middle of a poorer area known as Forestry, which brought with it many demands, especially on a Friday or Saturday night when alcohol fuelled angry and sometimes violent incidents.

There were only a few non-Tiwi living in that part of the township, which allowed us to witness daily life in a remote Indigenous community. We were not keen on the idea of locking ourselves away from the residents of Nguiu as do many non-Tiwi. We purposely kept our gates open at night and had no incidents or break-ins during our time in Nguiu, the only issue was the tendency for the community's pigs to take up residence under our house. On a number of occasions we rushed people to the clinic or made our phone available. We attempted to offer whatever help and support we could.

This community support included running a bicycle repair clinic to try and keep the incredibly poor quality bicycles that the Tiwi were sold for exorbitant prices from their only community store going. We handed out food and fruit to hungry children, taxied people around the community, and made our phone available when the public phone was broken for weeks at a time. We offered advice, drafted letters, documented community events, wrote up grant applications, supported the women's shelter, called the police for people when protection was required as well as helping artists collect iron wood, ochre and various plant materials for cultural art practices from the forest. It was a busy time but an extremely rich and rewarding experience.

Whilst many non-Tiwi lived in enclaves in quieter parts of the town we were lucky to be very much in the middle of the community. The Tiwi are a very open and welcoming people and we became immersed in the community very quickly, there was only one other non-Tiwi family with young children in Nguiu and I think our willingness to bring our children to their community meant a lot to the Tiwi, especially the older women. Much of what we experienced in our time on the Islands, both the good and the bad, informs this submission and it is important to set the scene because we were not outsiders looking in, we were outsiders living within the community.

What we saw and became aware of over time suggested that things were not as they seemed and certainly not as they were often portrayed. It serves the interests of some to portray the Tiwi as being better off than most other Aboriginal communities in Australia. Being so close to Darwin makes the Tiwi Islands a convenient location for Federal and NT Government media events, tropical backdrops and an abundance of grass make Nguiu look relatively inviting on television. This coupled with the false notion that the Tiwi are at the forefront of Indigenous enterprise and that as a people they are building an economy and future through business partnerships. This is a concept all Australian's are keen to hear, a good news story amongst so many hopeless and

disturbing ones, Unfortunately the reality suggests that this myth of a Tiwi economic revival flowing from forestry is just not true. There is no evidence to support the claims that the forestry and mining industries on the Tiwi Islands are creating the progress that these stories promulgate.

The reality was that virtually all Tiwi living in the islands were dependent on welfare, work schemes or local government positions financed by the Territory and Commonwealth Governments. From our observations and experience the Tiwi are just as threatened by poverty, lack of education, inequality of opportunity and are preyed upon by unscrupulous managers and advisors as any other dysfunctional Indigenous community across Australia. We saw no evidence or signs that the industries operating on the Islands were contributing to the improvement of the lives of the Tiwi. What we did see was signs that those industries were fuelling resentment, divisiveness and envy between those that benefited and the majority who did not.

Their island existence has protected the Tiwi from some of the problems that are prevalent on the mainland but that separation has also been a greater barrier to transparency in governance and rigor in service delivery. This has allowed the communities to become havens for people who would struggle to find employment in mainstream society. These communities attract people with poor skill sets, dubious agendas and a lack of empathy for the plight of Aboriginal people. The opportunities for poor or corrupt business practices to flourish and to become entrenched served the Tiwi very badly. It has also role modeled the very worst of behaviours to a community that needs to see the very best that mainstream society has to offer. We fail these communities by not monitoring the health of their service associations and organisations. Given that most Aboriginal communities in the NT have their own community associations that run local services there needs to be more auditing and checking. It was our experience that the NT government was seriously understaffed in this area and unable to apply any rigor to this task.

Our year in Tiwi was an extraordinary time for all of us, a remarkable experience in one of Australia's truly remarkable and relatively pristine environments. The current economic development on the Islands seems to be at odds with what type of development the Tiwi currently need. Indeed the type of economic activity going ahead has little to do with the needs and aspirations of most Tiwi people and serves only the interests of a powerful few. There is no evidence that these enterprises are contributing to the future prosperity of the Tiwi people in fact I would suggest that there is evidence that the Tiwi are going backwards.

Whilst documenting the signing of petitions calling for the resignation of John Hicks from the Tiwi Land Council, I was impressed by the reading skills and cursive hand writing the older generation signed their signatures with. In contrast, I spent time volunteering to listen to year seven students reading aloud. Many could not read and some could not even speak English, there would be no high school for them, no jobs and basically no future.

I would ask the Senate Committee to consider some of the following questions during their investigations. Where is the economic future so often touted by the Tiwi Land Council and Great Southern Plantations? Where are the millions of dollars flowing from forestry, mining and 99 year leases being spent? Why aren't all Tiwi people sharing in the profits and if they are not then why must they sacrifice their ancestral lands? Who is protecting the Tiwi from unscrupulous developers and manipulating advisors with hidden agendas?

I would also urge the Committee to go to the Islands and see for yourselves, listen to the people (with an interpreter), and see the state of the housing, see the children covered in scabies then visit the forestry plantations and see the size of the operation, look at their profit margins, look at the paltry rent paid to Traditional Owners, look at how many Tiwi are employed. Look where the Land Council is based, look at how many Tiwi are employed by the Land Council?

Inquiry into forestry and mining operations on the Tiwi Islands

Terms of Reference

- 1. an assessment of the environmental, economic and community impacts of existing and proposed forestry and mining operations on the Tiwi Islands including compliance with relevant environmental approvals and conditions;**

1.1 History of Forestry

They are cutting down and flogging off the tallest trees in the Northern Territory!

Melville Island has a 50-year history of forestry development intended to benefit the Tiwi people. In the early years there were small sawmills sawing eucalypts and cypress. The first plantations in the 1960s were of cypress (*Callitris intratropica*), along with trials of many other tree species. By the 1970s the slow growth of the 1700 ha of cypress led to a change to Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribaea* var. *hondurensis*), 2200 ha, but there were marketing problems. There was considerable Commonwealth Government investment in forestry research and development between 1960 and 1978.

Former federal environment minister Robert Hill gave approval in 2001 for Sylvatech a subsidiary of Adelaide company Australian Plantation Group to clear up to 26,000ha of native eucalypt forests on Melville Island to establish quick-growing acacia plantations for export woodchips.

The decision approved what was to be the biggest single land-clearing operation in northern Australia, imposing 11 environmental conditions, including retention of buffer zones around rare tropical rainforest habitat, wetlands, river banks and nesting sites for threatened bird species. It also stated that no more than 10,000ha could be cleared over any two-year period.

There were no independent environmental impact assessment and no public consultation process. Instead there were documents submitted to the Minister, none of which paid much attention to the impact of the plantations on the island's flora and fauna. Endangered species were not even listed.

Perth-based company Great Southern, which manages more than \$1.9 billion for 40,000 investors in tax-minimisation schemes including forestry plantations acquired the Tiwi Islands forestry operation in 2005 from South Australian forestry company Sylvatech.

“The Tiwi Islands is a fantastic place for us for a number of reasons. It's a very, very good area to be growing trees, unlike a lot of other parts of Australia, it has very consistent high rainfall every year. It's very, very close to our end markets. We are in the business of exporting woodchip to South East Asia, and Northern Australia obviously cuts shipping times and so forth, so from our point of view it's a great spot to be; it stacks up

economically as well as the benefits it's bringing to the Indigenous people.”

Great Southern Plantations Director of Public Relations, David Ikin.

According to the company's reports, the Tiwi project provides “a low-cost source of land” to meet growing global demand for woodchips. The company leases Tiwi land for \$17 a hectare, with investors paying \$3300 to invest in a 0.33ha acacia woodlot which provides a return on investment when harvested about eight to 12 years after planting.

The first 26 000 ha cleared was where the old growth forest was tallest, the land well drained and not steeper than about 5 degrees. Mature height of the native forest was used as a good indicator of the growth rate of plantation. On sites of lower productivity there would be less prospect for profitable return on the plantation investment.

After harvesting large sound eucalypt logs for export, the remaining forest is cleared with a chain between two large bulldozers, heaped, burned and ploughed. Much of the plantation has been established with genetically unimproved ‘wild’ seed from native forests in Papua New Guinea.

What this history suggests is that to date forestry has had little success on the Islands and that in over 50 years of investment into developing an industry it is still not thriving and there has been no success in creating a Tiwi workforce with experience and skills in forestry. Given Great Southern Plantations (GSP) managed investment funds model and the current world economic recession what commitment is their to ongoing management of this project? The extraordinary amounts of investor money already acquired by GSP to develop their Tiwi business and the tax benefits given to those investors make any long term profits a bonus rather than the driving force behind the forestry on the Tiwi Islands.

Given that every 5000 Ha of cleared land planted for Acacia forestry is worth \$45 million to GSP in managed investment funds, is there sufficient incentive to see these projects continue until fruition. Add to this lucrative enterprise the value of the hardwoods logs taken from the forests that are marshaled at a port on Melville Island and ‘on sold’ once loaded ready for export to Asia. It would seem that an awful lot of money has been accumulated before any harvesting has begun.

If the forestry industry collapsed or was abandoned on the Islands who would be responsible for returning the land to what it once was, or some semblance of what it once was? Who would manage the enormous monoculture tracts of a plant that originates from Papua New Guinea? What impacts do these trees pose for the unique environments found on the Tiwi islands? What precautions has the Tiwi Land Council put in place to avoid environmental problems? What conditions have the Land Council placed upon GSP to ensure they treat the Tiwi environment with care? What survey work and scientific studies have been carried out by the Tiwi Land Council?

THE TIWI ENVIRONMENT

The forests being destroyed are rich in wildlife due to the fact that they are on land where

originally tall forest trees originally grew, areas with high rainfall and rich soils. Scientists are concerned that the destruction of these forests is placing threatened and other native wildlife species at increased risk of extinction on the island.

Our time living on Bathurst Island allowed us to explore many parts of that island. Whilst there are no current forestry projects on Bathurst Islands interestingly there is a failed forestry area around the outstation of Ranku, this was abandoned after a cyclone wiped it out in 2005. In 2007 it was a thicket of bent and broken exotic trees and not a patch on what once grew on the site. What is being done about this potential environmental threat? What is the Tiwi Land Council's intention, how do they plan to deal with this type of problem? If they can't solve this problem how would they go if something similar was to occur to the current GSP venture?

A cyclone helped wipe out the Marine Harvest barramundi fish farming industry. One of the cages washed up on the north west of Bathurst Island. No attempts had been made by the Tiwi Land Council to remove this enormous structure. There was plenty of backslapping and many media stories about what a fantastic opportunity this fish-farming venture was going to be for the Tiwi. It would seem the Tiwi Land Council is very happy to pave the way for big business to invest in the Tiwi Islands but has no idea how to set up terms and conditions that will protect the islands from environmental threats. A Land Council is supposed to be concerned with land but there seems little evidence that they actually meet that requirement.

The Tiwi Land rangers are often touted as an example of the land Councils commitment to caring for country. As I understand it, much of this ranger program is funded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) through the Threatened Species Network (TSN). When I questioned TSN over their support for the Tiwi Land Council and explained that the Land Council were over-seeing industries on the islands that actually threatened rare and vulnerable species they became evasive and were not interested in investigating the situation. They claimed that it was important to work with Indigenous communities and if there were issues these were not to unexpected. This idea that things are going ahead on the Tiwi Islands, that the Tiwi are driving this economic development and the future is looking great is very attractive to all sorts of organizations. Unfortunately it has the tendency to blind them to what is really going on and given how difficult it is for people to visit the Islands it is hard to counter the 'all is fantastic' myth.

So what is being lost through this colonial style development model that the Tiwi land Council promotes? The Tiwi Islands have an international significance rating for their ecological values found across an array of different vegetation associations. The main types of ecosystems are listed below but a visit to the Islands via Google earth will quickly reveal how much of the Islands are bounded by mangroves and tidal rivers winding there way inland surrounded by great wetlands and swamps.

This wild tropical coastline is created by tides up to 10m that curve their way inland along complex meandering creek systems. This abundance of wet environments adds further importance to the islands high ground and its value to wildlife and biodiversity. It is these areas that are targeted by forestry and it is also where the Tiwi hunt the best game such

as wallabies and possums.

Eucalypt forest and woodlands with tussock and hummock grass understorey (Connor et. al., 1996).
Monsoon vine forest thicket and large areas of coastal, spring and riparian monsoon rainforests, which typically occur as small species-rich patches
Away from the coast: eucalypt forest dominated by Darwin stringybark (<i>Eucalyptus tetrodonta</i>) and darwin woolly butt (<i>E. miniata</i>), often in association with melville island bloodwood (<i>E. nesophila</i>), ironwood (<i>Erythrophleum chorostachys</i>) and northern cypress pine (<i>Callitris intratropica</i>).
Many forests also have a well developed shrub layer including Acacias, fan palm (<i>Livistona humilis</i>), the tall palm (<i>Gronophyllum ramsayi</i>), cycads and screw palm (<i>Pandanus spiralis</i>).
Eucalypt woodlands occur in more restricted areas, typically on heavier soils. The dominant species include <i>Corymbia latifolia</i> and <i>C. oligantha</i> .
Paper bark swamps occur on some creek systems and drainage depressions. Species include <i>Melaleuca leucadendra</i> , <i>M. cajuputi</i> and <i>M. viridiflora</i>). Grasslands and sedgeland occur on the seasonal floodplains including wild rice (<i>Oryza rufopogon</i>), and spikerush (<i>Eleocharis</i> spp.).
Coastal communities vary from beach dunes to salt flats, heathlands, swamps, shrublands and mangrove closed forest.
There are a number of species of mangrove, the most common being the white mangrove (<i>Avicennia marina</i>). Dunes may include coastal sheoak (<i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i>).

High rainfall and isolation have resulted in the Tiwi Islands supporting numerous species not recorded anywhere elsewhere in the NT and some are found nowhere else in the world. The islands contain the Territory's tallest eucalypt forests, along with an unusually high density and extent of rainforests. Some 19 plant and 19 animal species found on the Tiwi Islands are listed as threatened at the Northern Territory or National level.

The coasts support important nesting sites for marine turtles, internationally significant seabird rookeries, and some major aggregations of migratory shorebirds. The isolation of the Tiwi Islands also provides some protection for their plants and animals from some processes affecting many habitats in the NT. The predominant vegetation communities on the Islands

Professor Brendan Mackey Director, ANU Wild Country Research and Policy Hub was interviewed on the forests of the Tiwi islands for ABC Radio National program 'Background Briefing'. Mackey says the Tiwi Forests are classified as 'tropical savannahs' and that some 70% of the world's tropical savannahs have already been lost. Mackey says northern Australia has 25% of what is left in the world and tropical savannahs are as important as the Amazon rainforests. According to Mackey the forests on the Tiwi Islands are the jewels in the crown of those tropical savannahs.

That importance is borne out by the number of significant species threatened or vulnerable that occur on in the Tiwi environment (see below) Given how little environmental survey work and studies have been carried out there could well be more species, some perhaps yet undiscovered that may be at risk. Can we, as a country, given all our past experience and failures to act condone this negligence today?

Significance Rating International Significance THREATENED SPECIES

Threatened plants and animals of the Tiwi Coburg Bioregion.

(Listings at National/NT level)

CR - Critically Endangered,

EN - Endangered,

VU - Vulnerable,

NT - Near Threatened,

LC - Least Concern,

DD - Data Deficient)

38 threatened species are reported from this site.

Plants

Burmanna sp. Bathurst Island (R.J.Fensham 1021) (EN/EN)

Calochilus caeruleus (-/VU)

Cephalomanes obscurum (-/EN)

Cycas armstrongii (-/VU)

Dendromyza reinwardtiana (-/VU)

Elaeocarpus miegei (-/CR)

Endiandra limnophila (-/VU)

Freycinetia excelsa (-/VU)

Freycinetia percostata (-/VU)

Garcinia warrenii (-/EN)

Hoya australis subsp. *oramicola* (VU/VU)

Luisia teretifolia (-/VU)

Mapania macrocephala (-/VU)

Mitrella tiwiensis (VU/VU)

Tarennoidea wallichii (-/EN)

Thrixspermum congestum (-/VU)

Typhonium jonesii (EN/EN)

Typhonium mirabile (EN/EN)

Xylopi monosperma (EN/EN)

Vertebrates

Australian Bustard *Ardeotis australis* (-/VU)

Partridge Pigeon *Geophaps smithii* (VU/VU)

Red Goshawk *Erythrotriorchis radiatus* (VU/VU)

Tiwi Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata melvillensis* (EN/EN)

This subspecies is restricted to the Tiwi Islands and has not been recorded since 1992 (Woinarski *et al.* 2007).

Tiwi Masked Owl *Tyto novaehollandiae melvillensis* (EN/EN)

Brush-tailed Rabbit-rat *Conilurus penicillatus* (-/VU)

Butler's Dunnart *Sminthopsis butleri* (VU/VU)

False Water-rat *Xeromys myoides* (VU/DD)

Northern Brush-tailed Phascogale *Phascogale pirata* (-/VU)

Merten's Water Monitor *Varanus mertensi* (-/VU)

Yellow-spotted Monitor *Varanus panoptes* (-/VU)

Flatback Turtle *Natator depressus* (VU/DD)

Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas* (VU/LC)

Hawksbill Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata* (VU/DD)

Olive Ridley Turtle *Lepidochelys olivacea* (EN/DD)

Invertebrates

Cognate Land Snail *Amphidromus cognatus* (-/VU)

Atlas Moth *Attacus wardi* (-/EN)

Dodd's Azure Butterfly *Ogyris iphis* (-/EN)

Land Snail *Trochomorpha melvillensis* (-/VU)

The following extract from the Background Briefing program gives a clear indication of the importance of the forest that is being cleared on Melville Island.

Brendan Mackey: That's right, Northern Australia, taken as a whole, is one of the most intact natural areas left in the tropical world. Certainly most of the areas that are what we call tropical woodland and the eucalypt forests on Tiwi Islands, fall in that category. They're not closed rainforest like you find in the Amazon, they have been severely degraded just about everywhere else in the world, and really Northern Australia, and this is the main point we're making in our report on Northern Australia, is it represents one of the last chances to do something sensible in a tropical woodland environment.

Wendy Carlisle: Your report looks at all the top of Australia, from Cape York right across to the Kimberley, so in terms of the importance of the Tiwi forest, how significant are they in that huge sweep?

Brendan Mackey: They are the most productive, biologically productive forests in Northern Australia. They have the best rainfall and the best soil, so they really are the jewel in the crown.

According to published research, up to 12 native mammal species “are likely to be severely disadvantaged by plantation development” on the Tiwi Islands. A scientist with the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre, Ronald Frith has said that the plantation development “targets the tallest and most well-developed eucalypt forest environments” and would “substantially reduce” the habitat of native mammals on the islands.

THREATS TO THE ENVIRONMENT

In 2001 when Sylvatech was granted approval for the plantations on the Tiwi's, it was under strict rules. Under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity and Conservation Act* (EPBC Act) no clearing was to occur unless eleven conditions had been met. This was to ensure that threatened species and their habitats were not destroyed.

The Environment Centre of the Northern Territory claims the company has breached seven of its 11 permit obligations, including retention of buffer zones, scientific monitoring of environmental impacts and submission of a detailed threatened species monitoring plan.

It appears that neither the Tiwi Land Council, Great Southern Plantations nor its predecessor, Sylvatech, have not investigated the endangered species which were in the areas slated for clearing.

In one instance, the bulldozers cleared buffers as close as 100 metres to a significant patch of rainforest called Jump Up Jungle, and some of the last remaining patches of a native herb were also cleared.

Late last year, as community concerns about the plantations grew, the Northern Territory government did its own assessment on how things were going on the Tiwi's. The assessment was forwarded to Canberra to inform the prosecution brief for the Australian government solicitor.

A spokesman for the company said Great Southern had conducted an independent audit of the Tiwi forestry project after taking it over from Sylvatech and "chose to share certain of these findings with the government". Company literature recently distributed to Tiwi Island communities admits clearing of protective buffer zones "happened accidentally" in some places because of outdated maps and technology.

It is obvious that there has been a poor level of compliance with the biodiversity related conditions mandated by the Federal Minister. The breaches appear to be widespread and systematic. The lack of action on some surveys works clearly to the advantage of the forestry company. Another extract from the Background Briefing program shows how serious these breaches are.

Wendy Carlisle: For scientists like Professor Brendan Mackey, the land clearing on the Tiwi's should simply not be allowed to occur.

Brendan Mackey: Clearing a natural forest to grow a crop of anything is deforestation, and deforestation is not permitted, it's banned in most States in Australia and it's not acceptable anywhere in Australia. Our government has spent \$200-million trying to halt illegal logging and deforestation in the developing world, so if we are aghast at the thought of deforestation happening in our neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Papua-New Guinea, we should be similarly aghast at it happening anywhere in Australia.

Great Southern avoids telling its investors they're engaged in deforestation and go to great lengths to create a new term for it that they call 'conversion'.

David Ikin: The vegetation that is cleared as part of the conversion process is not rated as old growth forest, it's officially termed a eucalypt open forest/woodland. I'm not a forester, Wendy, but the foresters assure me that an old growth forest has criteria that simply doesn't apply to the vegetation sparsely wooded areas that are converted on the Tiwi Islands.

Wendy Carlisle: But isn't Great Southern clear felling the tropical savannah forest on the Tiwi's for your plantations, and our scientists on this program say that's deforestation.

David Ikin: The Northern Territory government classifies the land that is cleared on the

Tiwi Islands as eucalypt open forest, or woodland, I've not heard the term put to the land that has been cleared as savannah. People could use a term that they wish, but the official classification of it is eucalypt open forest/woodland.

Despite these attempts to split hairs and muddy the waters it is now apparent that serious problems have occurred in the Tiwi forestry. One of Australia's largest forest plantation companies has been ordered to pay \$2 million after a Federal Government investigation of its operations on the Tiwi Islands in the Northern Territory found it had failed to protect vital rainforests and wetlands.

The federal action against the company is one of the most dramatic imposed on a forestry company. Federal environment Minister Garrett said he took the breaches "very seriously". He said he was also imposing new conditions on Great Southern's Tiwi plantation including demanding a \$1 million bond on the company to ensure the buffer zones were repaired and ordering it to pay another \$1.35 million to the Tiwi Land Council for an Aboriginal Ranger program.

Is this the sort of company that should be allowed to expand its operations in an environmentally and culturally sensitive environment?

ECONOMICS

Sylvatech sold out to Great Southern Plantations for \$50-million. It was a good deal for Great Southern. For every 5,000 hectare tree lot, they can raise \$45-million from investors, which makes the Tiwi plantations worth over \$220-million to the company.

What do the Tiwi Islanders receive? Only about half a million dollars a year for the leases, plus a small cut of any profit from the trees

There are a number of serious economic concerns that need to be considered by the Senate committee. They include the following:

- Why is there so little evidence on the Tiwi Islands that forestry and mining has improved job opportunities and social and economic reform in the Tiwi communities?
- Why is it that only a few seem to do well from the big business interests on the Islands?
- Are those Australians investing in the Tiwi Islands aware of the land clearing and deforestation that are being carried out?
- Are managed investment funds simply used by the wealthy to reduce their taxes and is this the best driver for any type of industry?
- Are the stem and branch forms in the forestry plantations not ideal, full of forks, crooked stems or coarse branches, even after 'form pruning' at age 1 to 2 years?
- Will this require a higher pulpwood price to compensate for the reduced yield and the cost and difficulty of harvesting and debarking trees of such poor form, prior to chipping for export at age 8 to 10 years?

- What are the risks from cyclones and fire? Cyclone Ingrid in 2005 caused so much damage to plantations older than three years that they were replanted.

There are many questions to ask about the Tiwi forestry project. The main one is 'who gains, and who loses'? Investors in GSL's Managed Investment Scheme have immediate gain from 100% tax deductibility on the whole of their investment of several thousand dollars per ha. A net profit at harvest would be a bonus, but subject to capital gains tax.

The Tiwi clan groups who have freehold of the land receive a very small amount for leasing their land to GSL compared with GSL's lease payments to grow blue gum in southern Western Australia. The Tiwi investment company Pirntubula receives any royalties from exported eucalypt logs and later from wood chip exports. Where is this money and what is it being spent on? The Pirntubula Company remains one of the great mysteries of the Tiwi Land Council.

COMMUNITY

If the Senate Committee is able to travel to the Tiwi Islands to see for themselves they will hear many people talk of their unhappiness with the forestry. Some will be envious because they see other Traditional Owners receiving money for their leased land. This envy plays into the hands of GSP and the Tiwi Land Council as it paves the way for future expansion. But there are plenty of Tiwi who have seen what forestry brings and who do not want to see that occur on their clan lands.

The Tiwi Land Council is supposed to represent the interests of the Tiwi people in matters concerned with land and country. Based on traditional governance structures it is composed of older clan representatives from all of the traditional land groups and includes many Tiwi elders. From our time in the Islands it became apparent that it was not consulting properly, there were concerns regarding levels of coercion at clan meetings. Meeting fees were paid that encouraged participants to agree with the thrust of those meetings and there was a strong sense that the Tiwi land Council was controlled by a non-Tiwi and had been for several decades.

The Tiwi community that we got to know was certainly disadvantaged and dysfunctional by mainstream standards. Poverty and lack of education created a welfare dependant community that relied heavily on disposable cash. Famous Tiwi artists would sell artworks for a fraction of their real worth simply to get hold of \$30 or \$50 in order to buy food from the takeaway or to go to the club and drink beer. There were non-Tiwi who would commission an artwork and arrange to pay for it only minutes before the club opened knowing they would get an even better deal because of the desire for cash from certain Tiwi artists.

This is a community where people openly admit that they would rather get paid \$50 a day than a \$1000 a week because they can survive on \$50 a day. A \$1000 a week would lead

to 'Humbug' from families and relatives and the money would invariably be gone in a day or so. This ongoing need for money on a daily basis is related to the original hunter-gatherer existence but it is also a product of welfare dependency. What this means is that it is easy to buy support in the Tiwi community. A \$100 sitting fee will attract a good turn out and ensure the success of your agenda.

This is compounded by the traditional need to look after your own and your families interests. The men are generally absent from community life, they gamble under trees and congregate in the club but are rarely contributors to community life. This role falls to the women who are the backbone of the Tiwi society. They look after the children, they work at the school, they are the main churchgoers.

More than 90 Tiwi women signed a petition claiming the forestry project is ruining the land for future generations. They know that clearing the forests will threaten the source of ceremonial artifacts, bush foods and the materials for traditional arts and crafts. The women seem to appreciate the importance of the forests more so than the men.

There are however no Tiwi Women on the Tiwi Land Council. Why? Traditional governance structures are not representative and are undemocratic in that they marginalize a whole section of the community, the women. This is a section of the community that has made its concerns about the operation of the Tiwi Land Council well known as well as being those most concerned with the future and what it will mean for their children and grandchildren.

The fact that the Tiwi Land Council has divided families between those who oppose the deforestation and those who support it seems to suggest that the Land Council is failing in its role to represent the interests of all Tiwi. In our time on the Islands it became apparent that the Land Council actively tried at any opportunity to undermine the fledgling Tiwi Islands Local Government (TILG), Why? Why would the Tiwi Land Council try to discredit and hamper a democratic and truly representative governance organisation that is trying to provide services to all Tiwi? There are many examples of how the Tiwi Land Council criticised TILG, the most blatant was when they invited Nicholas Rothwell to visit the Islands and who then wrote a very critical and divisive article that led to community meetings and a petition calling for the removal of John Hicks from his role in the Land Council. Does this sound like a Land Council interested in what is best for all Tiwi people? Is John Hicks really the best person to be in charge of the Tiwi Land Council when so many Tiwi have publicly called for his resignation? And remember the Tiwi Islands is a small traditional community, that petition and the public meetings required enormous courage from those that participated, especially the 500 who signed the petition, as they would have been exposed to attacks from those powerful Tiwi who support the Land Council. (It was a slap in the face when that petition was ignored by Minister Brough. This was compounded when Brough turned up in the Islands, after the loss of his seat and portfolio, with private schemes to exploit the 99 year town leases that he had overseen the introduction of whilst in Government. Another divisive community issue that was

supported by the Land Council)

A petition, signed by over 500 Tiwi adults over 2 days, was tabled in Federal Parliament on Monday 9 Sept 06, it read:

To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament: We, the undersigned, are residents of the Tiwi Islands and wish to bring to your attention the concern of the Tiwi people regarding the actions of Mr John Hicks, the Executive Secretary/CEO of the Tiwi Land Council.

We, the Tiwi people, feel that our interests are not being represented.

After his 20-year involvement in the Tiwi Land Council, we feel that Mr Hicks exercises excessive influence over the respected Elders of the Tiwi Land Council. We, the Tiwi people, are not sufficiently consulted on the decisions made which have a significant impact on our land and our people. We have little information about the workings of the Tiwi Land Council, which makes decisions about our future.

We do not have confidence in Mr Hicks playing such an influential role in the Tiwi Land Council and immediately call for his resignation.

The undersigned petitioners therefore ask the House of Representatives to call on the Honourable Minister for Indigenous Affairs to acknowledge our call for Mr Hicks' resignation and to commission an inquiry into the Tiwi Land Council including their administrative procedures, land-use decision making processes and Pirntubula Pty Ltd.

Chief Petitioner: Gawin Tipiloura, Nguju PO, Bathurst Island, Phone: 0428 473 861

Many Tiwi traditional land owners claim the project has failed to deliver jobs and income for their communities, despite promises it would "deliver millions" in royalties from sawlog and woodchip exports to Asian markets. It is hard to avoid the sense that the Tiwi are being ripped off. If economic benefits were flowing from forestry to all Tiwi then many more Tiwi may support it despite its environmental costs because most Tiwi are acutely aware of how vulnerable they are and how dependent they are on government money. This makes the situation in the Tiwi islands all the more shameful because it reeks of a type of colonialism that should have been consigned to history a long time ago.

A former president of the Tiwi Islands football club, Gawin Tipiloura, was sacked from the Tiwi Land Council after criticizing it and suggesting it had not acted in the best interests of Tiwi people by becoming a partner in the Tiwi forestry project.

During our time on the Tiwi Islands I spent a lot of time working with and supporting the young Tiwi leader, Gawin Tipiloura who had the unique quality of thinking more about his community than about what he personally might gain from any situation. For me this represented a promise of a future where the Tiwi would be considered as one people, all 3000 of them rather than 9 separate clans.

“Well I think there's issues with this forestry project. I basically was wanting a really good deal in terms of benefits, because when you look at a lease for 30 years, we've really got to understand how does the operation work. So we should look at a way and work in with Great Southern and look at some arrangements where we benefit as a whole, as a people, and as a community”.

“We need to be able to go into bat, it doesn't matter what association you're going to be on, but you've got to know what you're talking about, and then you've got to have the skill to be able to bargain a lot better. I don't see it, it's not normal, my future is not to sit around a table just for 100 bucks, I want to make sure that my future is to sit around the table and put in a lot of hard work in looking at special projects or programs to develop community and to have that ongoing development within people and families.”

Gawin Tipiloura: Background Briefing

Gawin Tipiloura is today a Police Aid based in the station at Nguui. His standing in the community is such that he has been courted by NT political parties. He is an articulate and passionate speaker and he is respected in his community. Gawin is in his early thirties. He is a natural leader for his people, when he became a member of the Tiwi Land Council it was an exciting development. Unfortunately that did not last long as it seems alternative views and criticisms of Land Council are not tolerated. Once again, is this the type of decision that is in the interests of the Tiwi people? If not then whose interests is it in?

2. an examination of the prospects for alternative economic development opportunities and impediments for the Tiwi Islands including sale and promotion of cultural products, community development activities, land and sea management, and opportunities for involvement in future carbon trading and emissions offsets schemes; and

With global climate change a serious threat to Australia and the world, now is not the time to be clearing old growth forests in some of the most productive niches in Australia. The Tiwi Land Council has failed the Tiwi in that they have not supported the development of any other alternatives to the whole sale clearing and opening up of the Tiwi environment. Some of the options yet unexplored include:

- Tourism, where in Australia can you see such majestic and untouched landscapes. Potential for wilderness tours, fishing expeditions and cultural tourism are all untapped.
- Traditional crafts rely on access to suitable materials including timber for carving, plants for traditional dyes and weaving, bark for artifacts and plants for medicines.
- Carbon credits; Professor Mackey has crunched the numbers and says 26,000 hectares of Tiwi forest stores about 13-million tonnes of greenhouse gases, and at \$20 a tonne, that makes them worth over \$260-million.

This submission really only scratches the surface in terms of what is happening in the Tiwi Islands. Other questions that I hope the Senate Committee will ask is what is the function of the Pirntubula Company and where have the profits gone? Why are representatives of the forestry industry sitting on the board of this company? These questions have never been answered properly. I would urge the committee to ensure they get clear and proper answers and be prepared to drill down to find the truth. The Tiwi are a kind and generous people who are in a poor position to fend off unscrupulous businesses and individuals who are motivated only by greed and profit. We must ensure that the Tiwi are provided with education that will enable them to stand on their own and develop a future that is sustainable and equitable. The current state of the education system on the islands is failing the Tiwi. Unless that is fixed the Tiwi will remain vulnerable.

I wish the committee well in its enquiry and I hope that they can find a way to create a truly sustainable and productive future for all Tiwi.

Regards

Hugh Kneebone

12/03/2009