

DOCTORS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AUSTRALIA.

FORESTS POLICY

INTRODUCTION.

Standing forest provides numerous benefits, including the amelioration of droughts, floods, erosion, salinity and climate change. While the benefits of forests are usually considered as environmental and aesthetic, they are also economic. Haiti, a nation with barely 2% forest cover illustrates a ruined economy in which deforestation, amongst other factors, has led to profoundly adverse economic, social and health effects. Deforestation on Easter Island played an important role in its complete social collapse, while in contrast policies to protect and restore over-cut forest have reinforced the economic strengths of Japan and Switzerland.

Doctors for the Environment, Australia (DEA) Forests Policy, based particularly on the health benefits of preserving old growth forests, argues that there is sufficient evidence to call for the preservation of all remaining Old Growth Forest (OGF) in Australia and throughout the world.

This position is compatible with the policies of almost all of the major Australian environmental organisations.

Although an environmental case can be made for ending all logging in native forest, DEA supports, with provisos, the careful, sustainable logging of the re-growth native forest estate; for example to supply high value unique timber to the value-adding furniture and craft wood industries. DEA opposes clear felling and conversion of native forest to monoculture plantations whether of native or exotic species.

DEA and others have identified health-related problems from indiscriminate plantation forestry practices; however DEA maintains that carefully and sustainably managed plantation forestry represents the future of the high volume timber and pulp wood industries. Within the plantation industry the transition to mixed species plantations as a form of restoration ecology has merit.

OLD GROWTH FOREST. (OGF)

The definition of old growth forest has generated much confusion and ill-will. For the purpose of this Policy, the definition of old growth forest (OGF) is that of the National Forest Policy Statement “forest that is ecologically mature and has been subjected to negligible unnatural disturbance”. This implies that OGF is essentially undisturbed forest that has evolved over hundreds and thousands of years.

WHY PRESERVE OLD GROWTH FORESTS?

DEA, with the majority of Australians, would like all the remaining OGF in Australia protected because:

1. OGF provides secure habitat for many plant and animal species, some of them endangered and, almost certainly, some yet to be identified.
2. OGF is culturally and/or spiritually precious to many people.
3. There is relatively little OGF remaining in Australia. Australia has the lowest forest cover of any continent except Antarctica.
4. The greater the area of OGF placed in reserves the greater the opportunity for human appreciation, including that of employment-generating eco-tourism.
5. OGF is important for the conservation of clean water and for the consistent supply of water to many Australian towns and cities.
6. In some areas OGF is important in the control of salinity entering stream and river systems.
7. OGF is an important store of carbon.
8. Logging OGF is destructive; once logged OGF can never be restored to its previously undisturbed state.
9. There are direct and indirect health benefits from preserving OGF. This paper seeks to describe the health benefits of preserving OGF.

Approximately 2.4% of the world’s mixed-species forests are disappearing every year whilst the world’s plantation resource is growing (Ref 1). The continuing destruction of OGF in Australia undermines Australia’s ability to make comment about losses of OGF in the Amazon or in Kalimantan or elsewhere in the world.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF PRESERVING OLD GROWTH FORESTS?

1. Psycho-Social Benefits:

Forests have long been recognised as places which contribute to human well-being and peace of mind. For millennia sages have sought forests for inspiration. Sacred groves are found in many forms in many cultures, not only because they help protect biodiversity, but perhaps too because they form public spaces for healing and reconciliation. The mental and health benefits of exposure to undisturbed nature and forests are now beginning to be formally studied in various fields including that of ecopsychology.

2. Carbon Storage Benefits: Climate Change and Human Health.

Because mature trees and undisturbed forest have evolved over many hundreds or thousands of years they have stored large quantities of carbon in their timber, roots, leaf litter, soil and understorey. Although mature native forest trees may not respire and bind carbon at the same rate as young plantation trees, the release of stored carbon from logging or clear felling OGF is so great that it has been estimated that clearfelled and burned OGF produces much more carbon than would be taken up by the re-growth of the forest or plantation (Ref 2).

There is now no doubt that human release of carbon into the atmosphere is implicated in climate change. Climate change has profound implications for human health as spelled out in “Doctors for the Environment, Australia” policy on Climate Change (see www.dea.org.au) (see also Ref 3).

3. Medicinal Species Health Benefits.

Many of the most effective medicines in the modern medical pharmacopeia have been derived from plants, fungi and bacteria. Logging OGF, because it is destructive of biodiversity, risks the loss of yet-to-be-identified biologically-active plant and fungal species. This hazard is increased when native forests are replaced with plantation monocultures. The importance of OGF in the maintenance of biodiversity is recognised in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (Ref 4). Furthermore it is likely that biodiverse OGF is likely to be more resilient and thus better able to withstand stressful climate conditions. (Ref 5).

4. Eco-Tourism Health Benefits:

The greater the area of OGF that is preserved, the greater is the opportunity for eco-tourism and the financial and social reimbursement that goes with it. For the eco-tourist realizing the spiritual and cultural benefit from visiting undisturbed forest may provide psychological benefit with enhancement of the immune system and a reduction in stress. There is strong evidence that ecotourism is becoming more popular. The preservation of OGF provides a health-enhancing cultural resource for present and future generations whereas current forestry practices destroy them. In the United States there is insufficient OGF to provide for the growing number of Americans who wish to hike and to holiday in undisturbed forest. (Ref 6)

5. Clean Water Benefits:

One of the fundamental requirements for good health is access to clean water. Undisturbed ancient forest provides the cleanest water catchments. (Ref 7). Where OGF is clearfelled and burned, particularly on steep slopes, erosion and silting of streams is likely. If the forestry regrowth or plantation conversion utilises pesticides, herbicides and 1080 poison in its prescription, there is a risk of contamination of waterways with toxins.

Australian scientists, studying the OGF in the Amazon, have shown that mature forests are instrumental in creating rainfall and that OGF is important in stabilising climate. (Ref 8).

5. Clean Air Benefits:

Forestry is a polluting industry in its effect on air quality from regeneration and fuel-reduction burns. Bushfire smoke is implicated in asthma (Ref 9), and it can result in a decrease in lung function in predisposed individuals. For these reasons forestry operations involving regeneration burns should not be exempt from State-based Air Quality Acts, and must be included in regional emissions accounting. Where herbicides and pesticides are sprayed from aircraft there is a risk of spray-drift and aerial release of toxins.

Preservation of OGF and more selective logging prescriptions in native forests would produce less health-damaging air pollution.

6. Health Benefits of Resolving Conflict

Wherever in Australia OGF has been or is still being logged bitter community divisions have appeared. This is not without irony because many timber workers and

their families recognize and acknowledge the attributes of OGF discussed above. Their employers and unions, whilst they support the continued logging of OGF, state that they are thankful that some OGF has been preserved for future generations. Contributing to the destruction of a resource as precious as OGF is unlikely to ever be free of trauma and regret even when so doing provides a livelihood. As well many timber workers and their families will continue to experience prolonged psychological turmoil and experience a sense of victimisation when their livelihoods are seen as threatened by employers, unions, governments (State or Federal), politicians and/or environmentalists. It is apparent that depression, anger, family and community division, violence, and social stress with their legacies of hypertension and heart disease will continue to affect timber communities for as long as OGF is logged. (Refs 10 and 11)

Environmental activists and many others in the Australian community feel anger, sorrow and disempowerment as they continue to watch OGF being destroyed; they suffer all the negative health-effects of these emotions.

This situation of mutual antagonism need not continue. Where sensibly and sensitively-handled cessation of logging of OGF has occurred, as in Western Australia, gradual resolution of this psychological stress and the healing of long-standing community divisions is possible. Because of these health-damaging effects of conflict DEA calls for roundtable consultations, inclusive of all stakeholders, to be supported as a means of seeking a mutually-agreeable transition strategy away from the continuation of logging OGF.

7. Workplace and Road Trauma Health Benefits:

The timber industry is one of the most hazardous industries in which to be employed (Ref 12 and 13). Logging of OGF is the most hazardous type of forestry, particularly clearfelling on steep slopes with steel cables. The preservation of all the remaining OGF in Australia would result in fewer deaths and severe injuries from these forestry operations. It is well-recognised that owner-drivers of log trucks experience highly-stressful lives, associated with the high capital investment in their rigs and the need to drive very long hours. Preservation of OGF, with sensitively-managed severance negotiations for stressed drivers, is likely to reduce the risks of road trauma.

SUMMARY.

It is not possible to quantify with numeric precision the many health benefits that would accrue from preserving the remainder of Australia's and the world's old growth forests. Existing epidemiological science has not asked the precise question, "What are the health benefits of preserving Old Growth Forests?" Some of the documented health benefits likely to accrue from preserving OGF have been listed. Perhaps, however, it is most honest to acknowledge the gut feeling that tells us that *continuing to log Old Growth Forest is unhealthy*. (Ref 14)

Quite apart from the health benefits of preserving them, there is now overwhelming evidence that old growth forests are likely to be worth much more in monetary terms when kept intact than when destroyed. (Ref 15).

Doctors for the Environment, Australia recognises unequivocally that the time has come for Australia to preserve all of its remaining old growth forests.

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