

**Submission  
No 212**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN  
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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SUBMISSION TO:

**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5**

**INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**CHAired BY: The Hon Robert Brown MLC**

FOCUS OF THIS SUBMISSION:

**HEALTH OF THE TREES IN A NEWLY DECLARED NATIONAL PARK OF RIVERGUM FORESTS IN SOUTH WEST NSW**



RESEARCHED AND PREPARED BY:

**JAN HARRIS**

I am asking you, the reader of this document to suspend for a moment as you read this, any beliefs or conceptions you have about the River Gum precincts of NSW and Victoria.

As you read,

imagine you are sitting on the ground, alone

leaning against a towering river gum,  
looking out at a beautiful, majestic, serene forest in front of you

So now your mind is clear and your senses are turned on

- all of them –

sight, sound, touch, smell and taste

### **First challenging thought for you! Expertise!**



(Macca, oil 30cm  
x 40cm, oil,  
2011)

This man and his peers are the 'experts'. Their knowledge outstrips that of anyone else!

Why is this so you may ask?

Because they have experience of the forest over many, many years, and their knowledge has been gained using all of their senses plus their emotions. They love this environment. Their livelihoods depend on maintaining the health of the entire forest.

On the other hand the 'so-called experts' that urban populations refer to, and take notice of, have gained knowledge second hand, they have studied what others have written, they have viewed literature, videos, listened to talks. They have communicated via books (made from trees!) They have not used their senses in their learning, nor have they spent long periods of time in any forest, let alone a red gum forest.

To apply for Ranger and Field Officer positions, study in a relevant course is a high consideration. However, degrees may spend from zero up to 50 hours on health of the forest, with an assignment about the size or less than this submission to gain a pass. Compare this with the multiple hours of approximately 2,500 per year over 25 years (62,500 hours) for the average timber worker, learning, loving and knowing, and you can see how little expertise is actually available within the NP staff.

The Chair of the NRC actually admitted at an open meeting in Deniliquin, that over 4 yrs at Yanga NP, the personnel from NP had not been able to manage the health of the forest, it was in decline, but he saw no issue in stealing more land to give them to manage inefficiently. Give them time and they may learn! Or not! Like a child with over-indulgent parents who sees/ wants/ gets/ but then quickly loses interest and puts it into a corner neglected, while he sees/wants/gets again (refer NPA with the TSR now)

Are you still listening to the forest in the background?

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## Now for the next challenging thought! Management

What does management mean?

Our first expert is concerned primarily with the "health" of the forest, while our second 'pseudo-expert' is more concerned with infrastructure and rules.

The forest is a living, breathing entity that does not remain the same from day to day.

It fluctuates, it alters, it grows and it dies.

The timber industry understood this and it balanced the sustainable development of the economics, while preserving the forest environment. It struck a balance between benefits for the environment, and for the community linked to the forest, and for the economics and spirituality of that community.

Parks management refer to infrastructure, in order of importance: Helipads (152), Buildings and Sheds (3,800), Gates (6,930), Water Tanks (3,030), Vehicles (1,380), Culverts (180,000), Fencing (3,900km), Roadside Barriers (5,000km), Roads and Trails (37,600km)

While the River Red Gum Forests and other parks are primarily naturally resourced with flora and fauna, there is no reference to these in the primary management of the parks.

The Department of Environment, Climate Change & Water is the lead agency for establishing the NSW parks system and providing protection to the State's native plants and animals. Parks are the cornerstone

of conservation efforts in NSW. They are supposed to bring a range of benefits to local communities. But these benefits have not accrued, nor do they look like appearing in the future.

Context, vision, planning, inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes, policy, monitoring, evaluation – these are the bureaucratic speak that fills the Parks Management documents. Job Specs for roles as Rangers and Field Officers do not ask for any knowledge of the trees and natural features in the designated area for the job. A Rangers job spec only includes “observation” and “recording” of the natural environment. Field officers may “conserve”

Parks Management Policies talk about altering the structure of the forest from what it was when they were given it, to something entirely different. There is no attempt to understand past management practices, why they were used, and what results they generated for the park.

They talk about ignoring the historical forest stands, and instead seek to maximise biodiversity outcomes, in some cases developing new forms of biodiversity. They intend to actively manage the ecosystem to achieve conservation outcomes by experimenting with thinning healthy young trees, and keeping old hollow bearing trees; trying to alter the biodiversity; to use fire indiscriminately; and to try to manage weed and pests, by maybe selective grazing.

Management Policies refer to the costs involved, that it is expensive (timber industry did all this for hundreds of years, if they hadn't the forest would not be here). At the same time they exhort forest managers to experiment with the forest, to find out the best use for society, but at no point do they actively refer to past users of the forest who have the knowledge, who know the benefits of the forest and who could offer answers to the questions that are being asked.

NPWS and DECCW are attempting urbanisation of the forest, from the buildings for humans to bird breeding support by habitat manipulation and watering and to the buildings for possums. Any self-respecting possum would live in his own selection not this box attached to a tree.

The forest is not in poor condition as the propaganda states, it has been used sustainably – it was never in the timber workers interests to destabilise the forest because then they would not have continuing supply of good quality timber.

Protection is a motherhood word, widely bandied about but never really looked at as to what it is that the forest is being defended against or guarded from! If the condition was as poor as stated in 2009, then a plan of action should have been in place even before they were handed over to NP. This has not been so, and there is every indication that the trial and error experimenting on forest health management is in fact a death threat to the forest!

According to NPWS blurbs, Yanga woolshed now houses an interpretive display describing historical aspects of Yanga station and floodplain. This is not so, there is actually no interpretation in the woolshed! We were there when Danish visitors were visiting, and we took them through the shed explaining how, where and why things happened and how the out-buildings were utilised, the social and historical implications. The expert's room was left in an appalling state, while it was obvious the so-called interpretive display was done via a laptop computer and Google!

Let's take thinning as an example of management practices. In the words of the Natural Resources Commission, thinning will be experimental, to relieve water stress, favour hollow-bearing trees, and to create habitat corridors, but not to aid in the health of the forest.

One thinning trial over 5 months in 2012 will determine a sustainable annual maximum amount of River Red Gum residue that may be produced, taking into account the silvicultural and environmental impacts and benefits of the programme. The basis for this review is that the forest starts today, any data prior to today, or not gathered by NP is irrelevant. There is no longitudinal study being performed, just a short-term experiment.

This thinning is not looked at per tree or at the forest as a whole, but rather is a computer generated model recommending a basal area of 12sq m/ ha of remaining dominant and co-dominant trees – a mathematical formula conceived by a pseudo-scientist in lab conditions with little knowledge about River Gum forests. A model blindly followed by NPWS personnel. Thinning on the ground therefore tends to be of younger trees as they are easier to thin, leaving older trees more likely to be in ill-health to survive. It is much easier to measure the girth of one older tree than multiple younger trees. And the goal of NP anyway is to alter the forest from what it is today into an old growth forest with a minimal number of broadly spreading trees widely spaced! Is this what you would term protection?

This so-called scientific review will be carried out by an “independent panel” consisting of approved members of DECCW, NSW DII, and funded by Forests NSW and DECCW. They will make recommendations to the minister!

Note that this is not a long enough trial to make any scientific decisions on, yes computer generated models, but these are not scientific, and if the members of the panel do not have a knowledge of the forest over at least 10-15 years to take into account dry and wet seasons as well as summer, winter, autumn and spring then the panel is not an expert panel at all, and will not have the expertise with which to make an informed decision, let alone offer advice to government for action.

Any review or report on the forest should be peer reviewed by foresters as well as government appointees and private operators; otherwise it is all within the same belief system and will not be robustly questioned and reviewed. Current peer review practices are made within the same cohort of knowledge. My question to you is whether peer reviewed makes a report scientifically valid, or is it a critique of a written report, not a critique of the science.

Compare this to euthanizing all the teenagers in order to conserve for the seniors. Doesn't make sense for humans? Doesn't for trees and forests either!!

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## Next challenging thought! Evolution

Do you know how this forest evolved?

Prior to white settlement, aborigines burned the forest, and in so doing killed off any young river red gum seedlings. When the settlers arrived, they allowed their livestock to graze the grasslands that abutted the rivers. With the grass then shorter, the warmth of the sun hit the ground, and with aborigines no longer burning the forest, the small seeds of the river red gums could germinate and flourish when the next flood came along (prior to man controlling the flow of the river).

Stuart during his travels wrote that the banks of the Murray from the Ovens junction to where the Edward runs out were dominated by wide grassy plains, edged with trees and punctuated by increasingly larger reed beds.

The forests therefore evolved after, and because of white settlement!

They are new forests in the land of Australia.

They developed under a natural river flow which meant flooding did not occur every year and the trees, like all Australian flora adapted to the cyclical nature of the Australian weather patterns.

Unfortunately decisions made by Government agencies about the evolution and current status of the forest and its surrounds - flora, fauna, settlement of aborigines and Europeans, appear to be almost solely based on one source. This is an unpublished (even now) document prepared by Eardley in 1999. Because there is no access to this document, there is no way to determine whether time was actually

spent in the area, whether it is from word of mouth or whether it was plagiarised from other documents or papers.

The Government and the Parks management have based all the background to the bioregion, historical use of the land, flora and fauna on this document.

The Riverina Bioregion was the original homeland for many descendents of the early displaced white settlers. The rivers of the region, Edward, and Murray were and are central to the local lifestyles, especially as a source for food production, for recreation and for spirituality. Access to the water and its resources is a privilege inherited by generation after generation who have tended to the riverine system. Communities straddle the rivers, and as numbers diminish they have become more intensely committed to the region.

The spiritual values of the natural environment have a special meaning to the people of the Riverina. In their world view, people and country are an integral whole and the entire landscape has spiritual significance. This means that there is no separation of nature and culture, and the health of the natural environment and the local people are intimately connected. The wellbeing of the Riverina people is therefore influenced both by the health of the environment and the degree to which they can be actively involved in caring for it. Their very livelihoods are dependent on this connection.

Current Australian Government and State Government policy directions do not appear to support involvement of the Riverina people in the management of their country, across the whole landscape, regardless of tenure. There is actually a concerted effort to sever this connection by stealing forests and water from the people, and denying them a voice that can be heard and recognised. City based armchair cyber organisations such as National Parks Association and Wilderness Society are heard more loudly than the Riverina people who are connected to the land.

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## **The last challenge for the review panel - Political Implications**

Now you have a background of the forest and those involved in it, it is time to look at why the forest was turned into a National Park, and whether this was in the best interests of the forest and the community.

If, as Environment Minister Robyn Parker stated, that protecting Australia's largest River Red Gum forest would continue to be an important part of the State's parks system, then she needs to research more deeply how her chosen employees are managing or non-managing, because if the present state of management continues, the parks she cherishes will not be there for the next generation, they will be decimated.

The Government has been remiss in selecting NPWS staff, staff who are notably lacking in expertise, who, while being great people, are ignorant of their ignorance, and who have been noted as lacking at Yanga, even before the decision to give them control over another 107,000ha of new forests.

The NPWS cannot effectively manage parks and ensure they continue to be well maintained for the community of NSW. There is no evidence that they will deliver environmental and economic benefits. Statements from NPA and Wilderness Society, from afar, prove that they have not researched in the area of the forests and their surrounds. The scenarios they peddle are myths. If you contact them on Parks management and the health of the trees, they do not know - in their own words, "they suppose they are lacking water".

National Parks Association is an armchair cyber lobby group who live east of the ranges, who donate money for activism, and send letters via cyber. They ignore a \$70m industry that put money into state

coffers, and talk about \$50m support for restructuring a timber industry without asking how a timber mill can restructure if there is no raw material? Give a timber worker money because he has lost his job, but there are no other jobs available, and his house is now worth zero and can't be sold because the bottom has fallen out of the region, so he can't move elsewhere for work. They take credit for sawmills going out of production, even though one was state of the art, running on solar, processing a renewable resource! They crow about \$93m as a major investment into the Riverina region, but the region does not benefit from any of this.

These people are out of touch with the reality of the Riverina; they should keep on the east side of the divide where they belong – the urban city. These activists choose to reside in the most environmentally devastated and ruined parts of our country, areas that will never ever recover from their presence. Are these really the people who should be having the greatest say in our natural resources, given that they have utterly destroyed the natural resources in their own nesting areas?

It is the responsibility of Government to choose those who will manage the forests.

While the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) states that “Science underpins, and will continue to be essential to the development of programs to conserve biodiversity”, it is clear from the above that this is not what is actually “happening in practice”.

Information based on robust science is needed to ensure that policy development is evidence-based. The Governments’ policies and programs for addressing conservation and environment protection must be seen to be balanced and without bias. To do this, there must be a wide input of science from different cohorts of knowledge. Discussions with NP staff indicate that there is much missing science in their decision making processes. Strategic directions for science and research must not be under the same thinking cap. To get good robust research, at least 30% of this must be from without the DECCW, and it must be given the same relevance as research done within the DECCW. Otherwise the Government is only receiving information from one source, and there is more likelihood that this can become biased as a result of “group think”.

Unless decisions are based on science, and historical evidence, then the effectiveness of any investments in biodiversity will be jeopardised.

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## And finally

You will need intellectual maturity and emotional maturity when confronted with different views, and will need to do substantive fact-finding research/analysis first before making an assessment that is unbiased, correct and not necessarily political.

We owe it to our children and grandchildren to ensure that our natural environments are retained in a healthy state.

DECCW and NPWS management is not going to do this.

It seems hard to believe that these wonderful forests containing such an amazing array of River Red Gums, understory flora and fauna, sublime natural wonders found nowhere else on earth are likely to be decimated. The NSW Government has put the management of them into the hands of inexperienced departments who ignore past knowledge, and attempt to get their own knowledge along the way by running experiments, making changes to the make-up of the forest.



After reading this document, I hope it has given you food for thought beyond the political, and that you are in a better position to make informed decisions based on balanced views.

Let's hope you are strong enough to make the right decision and return much of this forest to those who love, respect and care for it, while leaving the rest for a national park for the pseudo- experts to practice and learn about.

And in so doing erect a bridge that can regain the lost trust that local communities have for Government Departments and Associations.

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## Questions that need answers

1. Understanding the condition of the forest
  - Given it is approx 107,000ha
  - Where and how do you glean this information on the forest?
  - Who are the specialists, timber workers, rangers, and/or scientists?
  - What experience of River Red Gum Forests do the specialists have?
  - How long and expansive is their connection?
  - Is a timber worker treated in the same way as a ranger?
  - What do you call scientific?
  - What is "full scientific certainty"?
  - Who would ascertain this?
2. Protection
  - From what?
  - How?
  - How do you protect 7million ha?
  - How many personnel does this take?
  - How have you come to this figure?
3. Association with the Land and custodial values of this land
  - Aboriginality v others
  - How long is heritage?
  - Sense of continuity and belonging is not exclusive to aborigines
  - Local community has an association with this forest equal to that of aborigines
  - Do you acknowledge that our people have a connection to the land as deep as the aborigines, and if not how do you come to this conclusion?
  - Going back 10 generations in your own family do you feel you have the undeniable right to control the land that your forbears walked and lived on?
  - Timber workers have a long family heritage and connection to this forest and area, probably reaching deeper into their psyche, than in those of aborigines who claim a connection but do not reside near the forest.
  - Conserving heritage helps to understand the past
  - How are you enabling the local communities to continue their heritage, history and association with the forest, given that the decision was made to sever these ties in 2010?
4. Biodiversity
  - River Red Gum forest by definition is primarily made up of River Red Gums – one species
  - To attempt to create a biodiversity within this forest, again by the very nature of the practice would "dilute" the very nature and reason for calling it a Red Gum forest.
  - What do you understand biodiversity to mean in relation to a River Red gum forest?

5. What is this National Park really for and who are the beneficiaries?
  - If established for social reasons, who are the actual people who are benefitting from this, given that there is no real benefit accruing to the local communities of the Riverina?
  - Where are the promised tourists?
  - If established for scientific reasons, who again are the actual people benefitting from this, university based scientists, or real on the ground scientists and natural historians?
  - And given that the NRC based its recommendations on short-term science with little reference to the weather patterns in the area, the soundness of its recommendations must be robustly questioned, and reviewed. Maybe even challenged.
  - If established for political reasons, as has been stated and appears to be the case, who are the beneficiaries and did these outcomes benefit the forest and the local community, or were they limited to political opportunism in Sydney?
6. Parks Management
  - Why are NPWS creating experiments in thinning to create a different looking forest?
  - Why is there no documentation on the history of management of the park?
  - The NPWS office is hidden away in Moama, with no signposting! Why?
  - Why is this office not located near to the park at Mathoura?
  - If tourism is to be the “next big thing” why is there no presence at the gateway to the park?
  - What has the NPWS got in store for managing the health of the forest?
  - After 2 years one would have thought there would be a plan for managing the health of the forest.
  - If you can find it please refer to me as I cannot find it.
  - National Parks Association (NPA) who agitate brutally for creation of National Parks; when questioned, had no knowledge of the management requirements to keep the park alive! While this and other similar organisations appear to have had the ear of Government, once this park was created they have shown no interest in its on-going health or its preservation!
7. Interaction with Local Communities
  - Why do National Parks, an emissary of the Government not communicate effectively with local communities regarding management of the parks (eg re sealing a path developed by volunteers without contacting those volunteers to see what their needs were)
  - Why is there no plan in place with local communities regarding a fire, and given the nature of management this will be a large, wild fire, as Parks management are effectively setting a fire by placing the kindling on the floor of the forest.
  - Why then are National Parks operating in isolation from the communities that surround the forest, and who once enjoyed the freedom of visiting and working within them?
  - Is it not the role of National Parks to approach local communities given that they have been handed control and the local community has been deprived of input?