

## **VEAC recommendations not the best outcome for red gum forests**

The Murray River red gum forests are under threat from lack of water due to the current drought and the loss of winter flooding. The current forest management plan provides for the conservation of these forests and will restore them to their pre-European condition by increasing the numbers of large trees. This is achieved by thinning out the smaller trees and allowing the larger trees to grow on. The removal of these trees supports a sustainable timber industry. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) recommendations for these forests offer to make them National Park without removing the threats and by taking away the means by which these forests can be restored.

As the peak body representing Australia's forested land managers, the Institute of Foresters of Australia supports the need for sustainable ecosystem management in Victoria's red gum forests.

This concurs with the principles of 'ecologically sustainable development' which is described in the *Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act (2003)*, as a concept which strongly integrates the conservation of biodiversity with economic development and community well-being and welfare.

VEAC is required by Part 3, Section 18 of its Act (2001) take account of the principles of ecologically sustainable development when conducting its land use investigations. This requirement was repeated in the Terms of Reference for its just-completed River Red Gum Forests Investigation.

Unfortunately, VEAC's final recommendations for the red gum forests suggest that the principles of ecologically sustainable development have been largely ignored in the rush to place almost all forests in parks and reserves that give an unbalanced weighting to biodiversity conservation above all other social and economic community concerns. This is most evident in VEAC's proposals to triple the area of national parks, whilst reducing the area of multiple use state forest by almost 90%. This will substantially reduce opportunities for human use and remove much of the on-ground flexibility required for effective forest management.

It is also clear that the requirement to integrate socio-economic considerations in viable 'ecologically sustainable development' is far more achievable in the current mix of public land tenure, management and use, than in that being recommended by VEAC which will virtually remove all commercial forest uses and substantially reduce opportunities for other human activities that contribute to community well-being.

VEAC has itself acknowledged that most of the benefits arising from its recommendations are of an intangible 'feel-good' nature that will accrue to people residing outside the study area, mostly in Melbourne; whilst the associated socio-economic penalties will be borne by local communities in the close proximity to the forests. Again, the inequity of this is at odds with the thrust of 'ecologically sustainable development' which recognises the role that a strong, diversified local economy plays in enhancing the capacity for environmental protection.

Without major water management reform, VEAC's changes to public land management and use will do virtually nothing, particularly given that the forests are already being managed

sustainably in accordance with existing government policies and plans. These include the Mid-Murray Forest Management Plan (2002) which was developed by the Department of Sustainability & Environment (and its predecessors) over a 14-year period in which it considered most of the same issues with extensive community consultation. VEAC have virtually ignored the past history of land use planning and created a false impression that the management of these forests has been stagnant for decades.

However, the justification for removing timber harvesting and grazing is weak given that they occur within just a 15 – 20% portion of the forests, and that they are officially regarded as only moderate threats that are well regulated to minimise environmental impacts. This is confirmed by the reality that the Barmah and Gunbower Forests (where most timber production and grazing have occurred) have, since 1982, been Ramsar Sites whose management has been required to meet conservation standards developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Contrary to the thrust of the VEAC recommendations, these internationally-agreed conservation standards emphasise that sustainable human use is entirely compatible with Ramsar principles and wetland conservation in general.

It must be remembered that Victoria's river red gum forests are essentially narrow islands in the sea of an agricultural landscape. As such they have a far more intensive history of human use and disturbance than remote mountain forests which are difficult to access and receive far lower levels of visitation. Accordingly, it stands to reason that the simplistic 'one-size-fits-all' ideology of national park expansion will be far more difficult to enforce and effectively manage when applied to red gum forests that are subject to continual pressures exerted through its boundaries. One thing is certain, we cannot expect these forests to revert to their pre-European state simply by 'locking' them up.

A regime of holistic active management is required not a land tenure change as recommended by VEAC. Lets hope the Community Engagement Panel can see this.

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