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ABC
Australian
Broadcasting
Corporation

Mr Robert Gordon
President
The Institute of Foresters of Australia

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Dear Mr Gordon

Thank you for your letter regarding the *Four Corners* report *Extinction Nation*.

Your complaint has been investigated by Audience and Consumer Affairs, a unit separate to and independent of program making areas within the ABC. We have carefully considered your concerns and information provided by the program, reviewed the broadcast and assessed it against the ABC's editorial standards for *accuracy* and *impartiality*.

We note your statement – *“It is well documented, but not reflected in the program that forestry has never been responsible for any fauna or flora extinction in this country.”* *Four Corners* reported that forestry was one of the elements identified as threatening the ongoing viability of certain species, particularly the Leadbeater's Possum and the Swift Parrot. The program has identified how they confirmed this fact against the Conservation Advice provided by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee for the Leadbeater's Possum, approved by the Federal Environment Minister effective from June 22, 2019, which identifies logging as a threat to the Leadbeater's Possum – http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=273

We also observe the Conservation Advice provided by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee for the Swift Parrot, approved by the Federal Environment Minister effective from May 5, 2016, which states -*The rate of collapse of hollow-bearing trees is also influenced by the other main threats listed here, fire and logging.*

Based on the current trajectory of habitat management, where loss of potential breeding habitat is inevitable under management practices used in production forestry (Forest Practices Authority 2010; Chuter & Munks 2011), population viability of swift parrots is likely to worsen as habitat continues to be logged.

http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=744

We cannot agree with your concern that the report was unduly critical of forestry while overlooking other significant threats to endangered species. We observe the report presented both the Minister and Brendan Wintle speaking about the problem of invasive species, and that issue was covered in some length in relation to the Swift Parrot and the threat posed by the introduced sugar glider -

SUSSAN LEY, FEDERAL ENVIRONMENT MINISTER: *Across rural Australia, there are too many introduced pests and animals attacking and changing our native animal habitat. That's the area that I want to focus on as a Minister, because something can be done.*

PROFESSOR BRENDAN WINTLE, THREATENED SPECIES RECOVERY HUB: *Unfortunately, invasive predators in particular are very difficult to manage. Cats are everywhere now in Australia and they eat about a million birds a day, 360 million birds a year are consumed by cats. Foxes, probably a similar sized impact. So we really do have to address this if we're going to actually conserve biodiversity in this country. But when you've got a threat that's everywhere, it's very hard to manage.*

ROSS HAMPTON, Australian Forest Products Association: *They're modifying the coops that they access, and changing the time of year, that sort of thing, to make sure that they're minimizing their impact. **Anyone who's saying that if you stop forestry altogether you're going to save swift parrots is wrong**, and I think they know they're wrong because **the greatest danger to the parrot is the sugar glider.***

STEPHANIE MARCH: *The problem for swift parrots and other birds in this forest ...isn't cats or foxes... it's another invasive animal.*

DR DEJAN STOJANOVIC: *The **primary cause of their decline today is predation by introduced sugar gliders** in context of severe habitat loss that's ongoing across Tasmania today. Sugar gliders, which are introduced to Tasmania, crawl into the nests of Swift parrots at night, where they kill and eat the female and her eggs. And in some places, up to 100% of Swift parrots can be killed in a nesting colony. And on average, about half of the female parrots that attempt to nest in a given year are actually killed by gliders. That's 50% every year.*

We also observe that a substantial aspect of the report, almost the entire final third of it, focused on the threat of habitat loss owing to development and its impact on the Eastern Curlew.

We note your statement that *“Four Corners lost an opportunity to report on measures that are allowing biodiversity conservation to successfully co-exist with the equally important requirement to sustainably produce greenhouse-friendly wood products.”* We are satisfied there was no relevant reason, or editorial requirement, for a report focused on the critical threat of extinction to some of Australia’s endangered species to examine greenhouse-friendly wood products.

Bias manufactured by selective treatment of Information provided to the program

Your statement is noted.

Non-disclosure of critically important context

Four Corners has acknowledged the information and advice provided by Mark Poynter, which the program carefully considered, and we note your advice that Mr Poynter *“pointed out that much of the ecological research into Leadbeater’s Possum (LBP) has repeated a wildly erroneous claim that 80% of the mountain ash forest type preferred by LBP are available for timber harvesting, even though the real figure is around 30% (with the other 70% already reserved for biodiversity conservation). Following his interview, Poynter sent extracts from the Central Highlands Forest Management Plan (1998) to the Four Corners’ reporter, Stephanie March, and producer, Janine Cohen, to demonstrate that the ‘80% available for logging’ claim is not true.”*

We observe that the report did not refer to what you describe as the *“wildly erroneous claim that 80% of the mountain ash forest type preferred by LBP are available for timber harvesting”*, so we are satisfied there was no editorial requirement for the program to present any counter claim to that figure or to present figures on the percentage of forest used by the Leadbeater’s Possum. As noted

above, the Conservation Advice provided by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee for the Leadbeater's Possum, approved by the Federal Environment Minister, identifies logging as a threat to the Leadbeater's Possum. The percentage of forest used by the Leadbeater's Possum that is not subject to logging is immaterial to the newsworthy focus of the report.

The fact that a percentage of forest used by the species is not subject to logging, is not considered newsworthy or relevant as it does not in any way detract from the newsworthy fact, and matter of significant public interest, that those areas of Leadbeater's Possum habitat that are subject to logging are considered by the expert scientists and the Minister to be a significant threat to the species. For this reason, we are satisfied there was no editorial requirement for the program to present the information you refer to. This was not a report about logging or forestry. This was a report about the extinction threat to certain native species, and to the extent that logging was relevant to that newsworthy focus, information was accurately presented in context and with *due impartiality*.

Furthermore, the program has explained how its research confirmed the current conservation reserve system is considered by experts to be insufficient to ensure the long-term survival of the Leadbeater's Possum, which was demonstrated by the Environment Minister's decision to retain the *critically endangered* classification. *Four Corners* confirmed that the Threatened Species Scientific Committee recommends expanding the dedicated reserve system for the Possum.

It became evident from the program's research that conservation reserves are also considered insufficient to ensure the long-term survival of the Swift Parrot, demonstrated by its *critically endangered* classification and the 2016 Ministerial approved conservation advice which states the "population viability of Swift Parrots is likely to worsen as habitat continues to be logged." That advice also states that "ongoing habitat loss, particularly within the primary breeding areas in Tasmania, represents the single biggest threat to the survival of the Swift Parrot in the wild particularly as it now appears to enhance nest predation by introduced sugar gliders. The primary conservation action for Swift Parrots is, therefore, to prevent further habitat destruction from land clearance, grazing and forestry activities in high quality Swift Parrot summer nesting and breeding habitat."

It is important to understand that the relevant, newsworthy issue being examined by *Four Corners* was the fact the species is considered *critically endangered*, and that logging is considered by the expert Ministerial advice to be partially to blame, regardless of the fact there is also forest habitat used by the Leadbeater's Possum that is not used for timber production. The fact there is forest reserved from timber harvesting used by the Possum in no way diminishes or alters the newsworthy focus of the report – that logging is considered a significant contributing factor to the *critically endangered* classification of the species. For that reason, we are satisfied there was no editorial requirement for the program to provide the level of detail on reserved forest you refer to, within this context.

Non-disclosure of visual context

Regarding your concern about the night-time Leadbeater's Possum survey presented in the report, we note that at no stage in the broadcast was it claimed or suggested that the Leadbeater's Possum cannot exist in post timber harvested areas. We note the Threatened Species Scientific Committee advice, approved by the Federal Environment Minister, lists logging as a threat to the survival of the Leadbeater's Possum.

Inclusion of false or dubious assertions due to apparent double standards in fact-checking

Your reference to *Four Corners'* fact checking, and belief the program applies "double standards" is noted. Audience and Consumer Affairs is satisfied the rigorous and forensic approach to the program's fact checking is applied routinely to all information considered in its newsgathering.

We note your reference to the following sentence by Professor David Lindenmayer from the report – ***There has been very little reduction in the pressure on the forest in fact it is significantly greater than it has ever been.***

We note the full context in which that statement was presented in the report –

PROFESSOR DAVID LINDENMAYER: *We're seeing record low levels of old-growth forest. We're seeing increases in the number of fires. We've seen very little change in the level of pressure on the forest. In fact, it's significantly greater than it's ever been.*

STEPHANIE MARCH: *A vast swathe of prime Leadbeater's habitat was burned in the **Black Saturday bushfires** in 2009. The area where they live is also a key source of timber for the state's forestry industry.*

PROFESSOR DAVID LINDENMAYER: ***Another fire and ongoing logging would basically nail the rest of the populations. The remaining parts of the landscape are essentially the small scrappy bits with very few large old trees left within them. Essentially you'll see rapid degradation of the remaining habitat, which is exactly what we've seen.***

We are satisfied the sentence you identify clearly states the pressure being referred to is not solely from logging, but explicitly refers to the threat of fire, with specific reference to the catastrophic Black Saturday event, and there was nothing materially misleading about this aspect of the report.

We note your reference to the following sentence by Professor David Lindenmayer from the report - ***Another fire and continued logging would basically nail the rest of the populations*** - and your comments regarding the accompanying vision which you claim "*was intended to convey destroyed habitat, is in-fact a hot-spot for Leadbeater's possum detections. The possum is being found extensively in the regrowth stimulated by the 2009 bushfires and this was also explained to the ABC's researchers by the state's forestry agency, VicForests, but was ignored by the program.*"

We note the full context in which that statement and vision was presented in the report –

PROFESSOR DAVID LINDENMAYER: *Another fire and ongoing logging would basically nail the rest of the populations. The remaining parts of the landscape are essentially the small scrappy bits with very few large old trees left within them. Essentially, you'll see rapid degradation of the remaining habitat, which is exactly what we've seen.*

The program has noted Professor Lindenmayer's 35 years of research in this field, including his work that demonstrates the fragmentation of the forest landscape, and corroborated it against the expert conservation advice approved by the Federal Environment Minister, which considers the Leadbeater's Possum critically endangered because of the potential future loss of habitat due to threats including fire and logging.

We observe this aspect of the report also presented the statement by VicForests and the perspective of Ross Hampton –

REPORTER STEPHANIE MARCH: *State-owned VicForests has told Four Corners: It is "... investigating this to find potential improvements in these practices" And "burning is inherently difficult and this low intensity burn did go beyond containment lines. This happens in perhaps **1% of burns.**"*

ROSS HAMPTON, AUSTRALIAN FOREST PRODUCTS ASSOCIATION: *Fires as we all know, are inexact sciences. So sometimes they may not be exactly across a line that you drew, they might be just a little bit inside it. I don't know the specifics of this example.*

STEPHANIE MARCH: *After an **increase in sightings**, the forestry industry applied two years ago get the possum downgraded from critically endangered to endangered. It also cites **a study that shows Leadbeaters possums in six areas up to 15 kilometres from their known range.***

ROSS HAMPTON: *The great news is that there are **thousands and thousands of possums.** That is wonderful news. Frankly, everyone involved in this whole process I think should be celebrating that. Most people are to be honest, because the forest industry cares deeply about threatened species.*

We are therefore satisfied there was nothing materially misleading about this aspect of the report.

We note your concern about the following statement by Professor Lindenmayer – ***It is going to take 200 years for this area to become new habitat for animals like Leadbeater possums, greater gliders, yellow bellied gliders.***

The program has explained how it gave due consideration to Professor Lindenmayer's research that indicates suitable nest trees are 170-190 years old, which was substantiated by the conservation advice which states that "*Hollows only begin to form in trees from 120 years of age*". *Four Corners* also note the conservation advice approved by the Federal Environment Minister, which states the rate of collapse of hollow-bearing trees is influenced by "*fire and logging*" and "*Leadbeater's Possums do not occur on burned sites, including those subject to moderate severity fire, clear-fell logged or regenerated montane Ash forest where hollow-bearing trees are absent until required conditions are returned.*"

We note your concern about Professor Woinarski's view that ***Timber harvesting is allowed to have a significant impact on the species.***

The ABC understands that Professor Woinarski is a respected scientist with more than four decades of experience. He contributed to the Federal Environment Department's Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Plan for the species, and the point he is making is corroborated by the conservation advice which states logging is a main threat to Leadbeater's Possum. We note your statement that the program was advised that "most of the forest is not being used for timber harvesting."

We note your concern about Professor White's statement - ***I don't think it is possible to have a viable timber industry and the Leadbeater's Possum. I think we will lose it if we keep going the way we are going.***

Professor Wintle is a respected and credible scientist, who is the head of the Federal Government funded Threatened Species Recovery Hub. His perspective is corroborated by the conservation advice, approved by the Federal Environment Minister, which states logging is a threat to Leadbeater's possum. We are satisfied that his statement was not materially misleading to the program's audience.

We note your concern about the following statement by Steve Meacher - ***The situation in Australia is that a lot of this work [ie. field surveying of Leadbeater's Possum] isn't being done by government agencies, and so if volunteers like us weren't doing it, it just wouldn't be done and the animals would be going extinct.***

The program has provided the following statement in response: *"Four Corners understands that about 100 of the detections of Leadbeater's Possums have been made by volunteer groups. At no point does Mr Meacher say that they have been responsible for all the detections made to date, hence his quote is accurate."*

We note your concern about the following statement from Steve Meacher - ***We think that there are probably between 1,000 and 3,000 individuals, which is a very small population [of Leadbeater's Possum].***

Four Corners has explained how its research established that estimates on the exact population of Leadbeater's Possum are strongly disputed. Therefore, the program included the claim from Mr Meacher, the head of the volunteer conservation group Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, and the following quote from Ross Hampton, the head of the Australian Forest Products Association:

*ROSS HAMPTON: The great news is that there are **thousands and thousands** of possums.*

In regard to your claim that *"scientists working within Victorian forest management agencies expressed shock that their work was ignored by Four Corners"*, we note that VicForests was invited to respond to the issues being examined in the report, but declined the program's request for an interview.

We note your concern about the following statement by Professor Wintle – ***Leadbeater's Possum as we know is a critically endangered species. It has suffered catastrophic population decline over the last 20 years.***

Four Corners has explained to Audience and Consumer Affairs that it carefully considered the different scientific interpretations about the conservation status of the Leadbeater's Possum. The program has provided the following statement in response –

*This quote is very clearly referring to the decline of the species, which scientists canvassed by Four Corners say is something that can only be measured over time. The conservation advice approved by the Federal Environment Minister relies on the ANU science. It clearly states "The ANU research group have been monitoring possums directly since 1997 at 163 long term field sites"; and **"This is the only longitudinal dataset of appropriate scale for this assessment"**.*

Analysis of the long term ANU monitoring data shows a decline in Leadbeater's Possum across all ANU sites of over 50 percent.

As the most senior member of the federal government funded Threatened Species Recovery Hub, Professor Wintle's interpretation of the 50 percent decline as 'catastrophic' is justified. If the global population of humans reduced by 50 percent in a 20-year period, I think most people would consider this to be catastrophic.

Unfortunately, VicForests, the Victorian Premier and the Victorian Environment Minister declined our request for interviews on this topic to put their perspectives forward.

The program made reasonable efforts to confirm that the ANU science is the only long-term data study for the decline of the possum, and does not agree that the Victorian government data has “over taken” the ANU science, in terms of monitoring population decline. The Victorian government data covers only a 3 years period, and the methodology changed during the research, whereas the ANU science is over approximately 30 years. The Conservation Advice, which was approved by the Minister, explicitly states when it comes to population decline the ANU science is the only data set they can consider.

Nevertheless, we observe the report made the relevant point from the Victorian Government research in the reporter’s voice over:

STEPHANIE MARCH: After an increase in sightings, the forestry industry applied two years ago to get the possum downgraded from critically endangered to endangered. It also cites a study that shows Leadbeater’s possums in six areas up to 15 kilometres from their known range.

ROSS HAMPTON: The great news is that there are thousands and thousands of possums. That is wonderful news. Frankly, everyone involved in this whole process I think should be celebrating that. Most people are to be honest, because the forest industry cares deeply about threatened species.

We also note the fact that VicForests and the Victorian Environment Minister declined to do an interview with the program and put their views and interpretations forward.

Interviews

It is important to understand that impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time, or that every facet of every argument is presented. Given the report was about the extinction crisis of Australian native animals, we are satisfied the focus on leading scientists and conservation volunteers to document first-hand the fight to save these wild creatures was relevant, appropriate and demonstrated *due impartiality*.

We observe that the program presented a range of principal relevant perspectives of eminent scientists with extensive experience on the specific issues examined in the broadcast, including Professor Brendan Wintle, the head of the Federal Government-funded Threatened Species Recovery Hub; Professor John Woinarski, a biologist with four decades of experience; Dr Dejan Stojanovic, a conservation biologist who has spent nearly a decade studying endangered birds; and Professor David Lindenmayer, a trained forester who has studied Victoria’s forests for nearly 30 years, and who was awarded an Order of Australia for his work and is a fellow of the prestigious Ecological Society of America. The program established that these scientists have between them hundreds of peer reviewed papers on the relevant issue of conservation in Australia.

We observe the report also presented the principal relevant perspectives of Sussan Ley, the Federal Environment Minister; Ross Hampton, Australian Forest Products Association; Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews; James Trezise, the Australian Conservation Foundation; Dr Bronwyn Fancourt, Ecologist at the University of New England and Stephen Meacher, Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum.

The program has explained that its requests to VicForests, the Victorian Environment Minister and the Victorian Premier for detailed interviews were declined. We observe that a relevant aspect of a statement provided to the program by VicForests, in response to fire management, was included in the broadcast, and to the extent that the Victorian Premier was willing to answer questions when “door stopped” by the reporter, his responses were included in the broadcast.

Regarding your concerns about Mark Poynter, *Four Corners* has explained that his contact with the program and material he provided did help to inform its understanding of the matters examined in the report, and they have provided the following response –

During our interview with Mark Poynter, he described himself as a “commentator” and said “I’m not a researcher, I’m not an academic, I’m just looking at (it) from a forestry perspective”. As a result, Four Corners decided that Ross Hampton, as the head of the Australian Forest Products Association, was a more appropriate person to quote in the story.

The program has also explained to Audience and Consumer Affairs that certain relevant points made by Mr Poynter were also expressed by Mr Hampton, which were included in the broadcast.

Four Corners understands Steve Meacher is the head of a volunteer organisation dedicated to the long-term survival of the Leadbeater’s Possum, who therefore represented a principal relevant perspective on the issue of the animal’s potential extinction. His interest in the issue was clearly disclosed and position on the matter was clear to the program’s audience. We are satisfied there was no editorial requirement to report the information you identify within the context of his contribution to the report.

Professor Woinarski was interviewed as a relevant expert who assisted the Federal Department of Environment draft the Recovery Plan for the Leadbeater’s Possum. We are satisfied he represented a principal relevant perspective on the issues examined in the report, and there was no editorial requirement to report the information you identify within the context of his contribution.

Your comparative assessment of the interviews in the broadcast are noted. We are satisfied that the questions posed by the reporter were relevant and based strictly on news value, and that all interviewees were afforded ample opportunity to respond to the questions and to make their positions clear. We are satisfied that while rigorous, the reporter demonstrated a consistently civil and objective approach.

For these reasons, Audience and Consumer Affairs is satisfied the program demonstrated *due impartiality* in the way it gathered and presented relevant information and perspectives on the extinction threat to various native Australian animals. The program demonstrated open-mindedness and fairness by seeking and presenting a range of informed perspectives from diverse sources including relevant senior politicians, the forestry industry, scientists and conservation activists and volunteers who were deeply familiar with the subject.

We are satisfied the program made reasonable efforts, by considering a breadth of information on the issue being investigated and presenting the relevant data, to ensure the material facts were accurately presented, in context.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to our attention, and for allowing the ABC the opportunity to respond to them. Please be assured that your reaction to the program has been brought to the attention of the reporter and the program’s Executive Producer.

The ABC Code of Practice is available online at the attached link;
<http://about.abc.net.au/reports-publications/code-of-practice/>.

Should you be dissatisfied with this response to your complaint, you may be able to pursue the matter with the Australian Communications and Media Authority <http://www.acma.gov.au>

Yours sincerely

Kieran Doyle
Investigation Officer
Audience and Consumer Affairs