

Deceptive misuse of imagery by industrial loggers

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In the lead up to the Federal election a cynical fear campaign has been waged by supporters of industrial logging to exploit imagery of fine furniture, wooden boats and timber workers families to justify their ongoing access to Tasmania's old growth forests. Rod Scott, Chief of Staff to Paul Lennon, had an article published in the Canberra Times last week arguing that an end to old growth logging 'would take away Tasmania's signature value-adding timber industries.'

As a user of Tasmania's specialty timbers I feel moved to respond to the misleading campaign being conducted by the beneficiaries of Tasmania's woodchipping frenzy.

Rod Scott's perspective on Tasmanian forestry is coloured by his allegiances to Tasmania's entrenched power structure. He does not represent the interests of specialty timber users. Scott is former editor of northern Tasmania's newspaper which is based in Launceston, the heartland of Australia's biggest woodchipping company - Gunns, and is now senior staffer to Tasmania's logging hard-man Premier Paul Lennon. The current Labor Government receives donations from Gunns and has overseen a period in which the area of State forest logged annually has tripled. The explosion in woodchip production since the signing of the RFA has created unprecedented wealth for those associated with Gunns in the form of record annual profits and a soaring share price.

Most of Tasmania's specialty timber workers are gravely concerned for the future as unprecedented rates of forest clearing and conversion to plantations is decimating their resource and future prospects. In Tasmania, old, slow growing, high quality, durable timbers are being systematically replaced with fast growing, poor quality, pulpwood species. There are significant concerns amongst specialty timber users that their sector will be completely decimated within 10 years if clearfelling in old growth forests continues.

Following clearfelling, forests that held specialty timbers are re-sown with either native eucalypts or plantation timbers on short logging rotations of 20-90 years. The intense burning following clearfelling, while favouring regeneration of eucalypts, ultimately eliminates specialty timbers which thrive in cool, wet shaded conditions. Tasmania's icon specialty timbers such as myrtle, sassafrass and celery-top pine do not reach commercial maturity until they are 300-500 years old. Once clearfelled these timbers will never regenerate to maturity again unless the forest is left undisturbed for many hundreds of years.

In an old growth clearfelling operation, as much as 75% of the timber logged never leaves the coupe and is left to be burned. Of the timber that is used about 85% is directly woodchipped (referred to as 'residue' by Rod Scott), about 15% goes to sawlog of which

less than 20% is recovered as sawn timber. Typically, less than 1% of the harvest ends up as veneer and a miniscule amount is used by specialty timber artisans. This kind of logging, based upon rapid extraction and cost minimisation, now predominates in Tasmania's wet forests. Although woodchip production has tripled to over 5 million tonnes per annum since the signing of the State's Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) in 1997 it has come at a huge cost - at least 40,000 hectares of forests containing specialty timbers has been lost.

Clearfelling is not required to supply timber for specialty bowls and fine furniture – in fact one old growth tree selectively harvested or salvaged has the potential to keep a Tasmanian craftsman employed for many years and has the capacity to produce many thousands of dollars worth of product. In reality, clearfelling is required to sustain high volumes of wood cheaply into low value export commodity markets in which the Tasmanian timber industry is a major player.

It is the height of cynicism that Tasmania's woodchipping interests hide behind the soft emotive imagery of specialty timber bowls and fine furniture to generate support for their ongoing access to the State's virgin forests which are systematically being converted into high rotation fibre production farms to maintain woodchipping profits for the benefit of a few companies and their shareholders.

Families of timber workers are also used as pawns in the game of deception. Many workers work long hours in tough conditions, and despite having fears about the sustainability of their industry, they are scared to speak out against the might of the industrial logging interests for fear of vilification and losing their job.

What must be recognised is that the timber industry itself has been responsible for significant job shedding. Tasmania's largest timber companies operate on the basis of maximising economic efficiency - the need to produce the greatest volume, hence the greatest profit, in the shortest time. Jobs and labour costs are minimised through rapid harvest, bigger machinery, larger log trucks and automation of mills.

The component of total timber industry jobs reliant on the logging of old growth forests is relatively small. There are just 330 jobs in processing old growth timber into sawn timber, veneer, craft and furniture, an estimated 215 jobs in harvesting and management, and 35 in transporting old growth logs. In all, there are currently around 580 jobs related to the logging of old growth forests in Tasmania in an industry that employs a total of 7,900 (ABS, May 2004).

Groups representing the woodchipping interests have been notorious for over-inflating the jobs associated with old growth logging and the numbers quoted have been rising steadily as the 2004 Federal election draws closer. The Forest Industries Association of Tasmania has quoted the number as 1,800¹ and 4,000² whilst recent newspaper

¹ Glenn Britton, spokesman for FIAT, multiple media outlets, 8/9/2004.

² Terry Edwards, CEO of FIAT, The Mercury, 13/9/2004.

advertisements placed by Gunns Ltd intimated that ending old growth logging would cost 8,000 jobs.

The logging of old growth forests is not about specialist bowls or oak floors as Rod Scott would have us believe, although these are a nice side benefit - it is really about Tasmania's powerful elite maintaining control over the State's natural resources to maintain the windfall financial returns they have become accustomed to since the signing of Tasmania's Regional Forest Agreement.

If logging old growth forests really was about creating specialty products, then the State Government would embrace a move to selective harvest based upon ecologically sustainable yield. Such a model was recently put forward by Timber Workers for Forests (TWFF) in a plan to ensure the future of the specialty sector, which is a significant employer and generates \$100 million in turnover every year. The TWFF plan is the product of extensive consultation over an eight month period and is designed to ensure that future generations of Tasmanians can have access to quality timber to maintain their crafts and traditions. The TWFF plan was labeled as 'selfish' by Labor's Forestry Minister Bryan Green because it accommodates conservation needs. The State Labor Government and Forestry Tasmania were unwilling to engage in the process driven by timber workers to develop the plan which, if embraced, will ensure there is a future for specialty timbers. This confirms to us that supporters of industrial logging are only interested in using the positive imagery of the specialty timber sector to further their own ends – which in reality is big money, ego and power. To the State's power brokers there is more at stake than bowls and flooring if access to the State's forests is reduced.