

Letters to the Editor

The following is a compendium of letters that I have sent to various newspapers, chiefly *The Mercury*, *The Examiner* and *The Advocate*; also *The Australian* and *New Scientist*. Most, but not all, have been published. I have indicated the newspaper(s) to which I sent the letter and, where known, those in which the letter was subsequently published (though my records are incomplete as I would not necessarily have been informed of publication). The date given is sometimes the date on which the letter was sent; other times it is the date of publication.

Simon Grove

25th July 2012 (*The Mercury*, *The Advocate*, *The Examiner*, *The Australian*; published in *The Advocate*)

To what lengths will the ENGO negotiators go to secure their Tasmanian forest reservation package? Having already brought the forestry sector to its knees through market attacks and two years of political uncertainty, it now seems that they are prepared to sanction an increase in the intensity of native forest harvesting on non-reserved land. This is not an olive-branch for forestry, it's a poison chalice. If they think that it would be a good conservation outcome, they're even more blinkered than I had realised. Why do people continue to refer to them as conservationists when they don't seem to know the meaning of the word? What happened to the concept of sustainability? It's not just a buzz-word, it's meant to be a guiding principle for how we manage our resources and our lives, but the ENGOs have squeezed it out of the debate. If we really want to see good conservation practices, we need a process with objective science at its heart – there are many competent conservation biologists in Tasmania, but they have been disenfranchised in favour of paying lip-service to science, as recent reviews of the ENGOs' and IGA reports have made clear. If this agreement goes ahead as currently envisaged, then society and the wider environment will be paying a huge price for the ENGO negotiators' arrogance, hypocrisy and wilful ignorance.

15th July 2012 (published in *The Mercury*)

It's interesting to observe the recreational fishing fraternity claiming the moral high ground in their stance against the supertrawler *Margiris* because of its possible impact on fish stocks. Would these be the same people who only a few years back successfully lobbied the State government to abandon its plans for a science-based network of no-take marine reserves in Tasmanian waters? And who continue to campaign against reductions in catch-rates for the top predators in our coastal environment, despite growing evidence of ecosystem collapse? If anything positive is to come from the *Margiris* affair, perhaps it will be a wider recognition of the importance of science – particularly ecology – in developing wise policies for both fisheries and conservation. For any new converts to the

sustainability cause out there, the slogan 'I fish and I vote' doesn't quite do this complexity justice.

14th July 2012 (*The Mercury, The Advocate, The Examiner; published in The Advocate*)

Why are our democratic structures so vulnerable to policy-capture by extremists? Somewhere in their upbringing, the present leadership in the anti-forestry camp seems to have missed out on some of the fundamentals of social and cognitive development. They value myth-making over critical thinking; fear-mongering over rationalising; fiction over science; closed-mindedness over learning; self-righteousness over modesty; petulance over humility; argumentation over discussion; fanaticism over tolerance; social division over harmony; rights over responsibility; self-serving beliefs over a cold, hard look at the facts. They spread distrust yet are themselves demonstrably untrustworthy. Why, in the circumstances, are our politicians rewarding bad behaviour by engaging with them? It cannot lead to a sensible outcome. People with this sort of character-profile are like spoilt children: they don't do negotiation, they expect capitulation. Let them spit the dummy instead – it will expose their moral immaturity, while giving some space for the grown-ups to begin developing science-based policies that really do try and do the right thing for society and the environment.

25th June 2012 (published in *The Advocate*)

With a possible resolution drawing near in the forests intergovernmental agreement, I hope that Tasmanians are not fooled into believing that this retrograde process has had a firm basis in conservation science – quite the opposite in fact, as anyone who has critically read the IGA reports should be aware. Because science has been so subverted, expect any real nature conservation benefits to be marginal, and offset by losses elsewhere. Meanwhile the process has already impacted hugely on the forestry sector, with more pain to follow. So if the agreement isn't driven by science, what is driving it? At one level, it's down to the perverse politics and misplaced priorities of what passes for environmentalism in Tasmania. At another, it's just one more case of politicians valuing self-preservation over the public good. Thus have these forces conspired to re-brand market sabotage and market lockout as the 'market downturn', from which forestry must be 'saved' by the IGA. This would all seem merely farcical were it not for its serious impact on employment and the economy. It seems all the more ironic given that native forestry must rank among the most ecologically sustainable of natural resource management activities around.

18th May 2012 (*The Mercury*)

Before Tasmanians join in the railings of a certain cabinet minister against his own government's budgetary support for Forestry Tasmania, let's not forget that the parlous financial condition of the formerly profitable government business enterprise is largely

the doing of the anti-forestry fundamentalists and their wealthy benefactors who count themselves among the minister's chief support-base: *their* campaigns of misinformation, *their* smears, *their* market attacks and *their* economic sabotage. The direct imposts on the poor Tasmanian taxpayer are now self-evident. But where are the real conservation benefits that might conceivably justify this societal pain? Regrettably, I for one don't see any, but nor would I expect to given the flawed logic and decidedly un-green thinking that has underpinned the so-called environmental campaigns of recent years.

22nd April 2012 (published in *The Mercury*)

Ever since the eighties and Farmhouse Creek, Bob 'Lorax' Brown has doggedly preached that Tasmanian-style native forestry equates to total forest destruction, and a whole generation of impressionable environmentalists has taken him at his word. So I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry when I read his comments describing his proposed 'wilderness walk' from Hobart to the Styx. According to Bob, the logged native forest en route hasn't been trashed after all, and 'has great potential to recover quickly'. Perhaps he has finally learnt that the last tree isn't about to be cut down, and that our forests aren't stocked with truffula trees but with eucalypts and their congeners that regenerate as well after harvest as they do after wildfire. Bob wouldn't be the only environmentalist paying foresters a sideways compliment these days: the ENGOs backing the Tasmanian Forests Intergovernmental Agreement consider that the once-logged forests in the vicinity of Bob's old stomping-ground at Farmhouse Creek now have high conservation value too.

21st April 2012 (*The Mercury*)

As a newcomer to Tasmania, Ross Sala Tenna's reaction to the autumn regeneration burns (*Saturday Mercury*) is understandable – many long-term residents find them equally confronting. However, this is no reason to declare our forest practices either antiquated or third-world. Indeed his letter was so full of forestry and ecological fallacies that to respond to them all in writing would require far more space than the editor would allow me. Instead, I would recommend that he (and others in a similar position) have a one-to-one chat with a professional forester or forest ecologist, because of the wealth of knowledge and experience on which these professionals can draw. It's not that anyone's going to try to persuade people to love regeneration burns, it's more that it ought to be possible to dispel a whole swag of misconceptions that can end up clouding one's perspective on forestry and conservation. In my experience, those who have been prepared to engage with the forestry profession in this way, rather than learn their forestry from others with altogether different agendas, have been pleasantly surprised at what they have learnt.

3rd April 2012 (*The Mercury*)

We have all heard about the subversion of hard evolutionary science by creationism. But how many readers are aware that in Tasmania, the hard science of conservation biology is being subverted by what we may call environmental validationism? You start with a fixed position ('the ENGOS have told us where the forest reserves should be'), and then you write a report that cannot test the ENGOS' claims because it doesn't consider whether the reserves, either in their entirety or in part (a) are any better than a random slice of Tasmania and (b) fill critical gaps in the existing reserve network. This is the polar opposite of a sensible conservation planning exercise, and a perversion of the scientific process.

25th March 2012 (published in *The Mercury*)

Evidence-free anti-forestry letters provide the newspapers with glib, bite-sized offerings for their readers. In contrast, the task of explaining how things really are in forestry faces a major handicap: it takes many more words, because of its sheer complexity and because of all the entrenched myths that must be countered along the way. Please bear with me – I just hope the editor will give me the space I need to elaborate...

24th March 2012 (*The Mercury*)

Science has never been a strong point in the anti-forestry camp's arguments, but Bob Brown demonstrated an abysmal grasp of the scientific process in claiming that the West report offers scientific proof that the ENGO-nominated forests 'need to be protected'. It can do no such thing. The so-called 'validation' exercise failed to compare the nominated forests with forests elsewhere in Tasmania irrespective of tenure and protection status. Accordingly, in my opinion, about all it can do is to 'prove' that if you reserve a forest, then its conservation values, whether assessed as trivial or profound, will henceforth be reserved. *Q.E.D.* Wow, what a momentous revelation, well worth the months of uncertainty and anticipation! On this logic, the ENGOS could now nominate a further half-million hectares of 'HCV' forest reserves and have that claim 'scientifically validated' too. Before this report is given any more credence, it should be peer-reviewed by competent, independent and ideologically unbiased conservation scientists. Otherwise, to the many perverse non-conservation outcomes likely to arise through this process, we can add the gross perversion of science.

15th March 2012 (*The Mercury*, and subsequently *The Advocate* and *The Examiner*)

No surprise that many people feel uneasy about Tasmanian forestry, given daily media coverage of anti-forestry diehards' messages of deforestation and destruction, greed and corruption. Career fundamentalists have created their very own forestry ogre – a public target for endless tirades of vilification and outrage. My hope is that freethinkers can distinguish this 'straw-man' version of forestry from the real thing. Real forestry is not

about sustaining social polarisation, it's about sustaining forests – a complex balancing-act, grounded in long-term and big-picture thinking, empiricism, ecology, stewardship and adaptive management. Forestry is not always pretty, but foresters appreciate that looks aren't everything and that social attitudes are impermanent, sometimes changing faster than the trees can regrow after harvest. They recognise that, for markets to have faith in wood's credentials of environmental superiority, wood-supplies must be certified as sustainable, and must also be sustained. Many fear that bowing to today's anti-sustainability brand of faux environmentalism will deliver perverse policy outcomes that undermine best-practice forestry and conservation. They are wary of pressure for another spree of poorly-targeted forest reservation, especially if this doomed attempt at appeasement is accompanied by deregulation or intensification of forestry locally plus further unsustainable forest exploitation overseas.

8th March 2012 (published in *The Mercury*)

We would like to put some facts on the table regarding the informal forest reserve system on state forest. The area of informal reserve already exceeds 300,000 hectares, a figure which is still growing and which currently represents a fifth of the entire area of state forest. Informal reserves comprise a network of unharvested forest dispersed through the production-forest landscape. They encompass a diversity of forest types and capture a range of conservation values, including priority forest types, significant geological features and habitat for threatened species. While some informal reserves are as small as 1 hectare, there are hundreds more which are each over 100 hectares - larger than many of Tasmania's formal conservation areas. In providing wildlife corridors, riparian buffers, refugia and structural complexity, these reserves contribute important ecological functions that are well understood by professional conservation biologists, even if not by some prominent environmentalists.

19th February 2012 (*The Mercury*)

To the extent that a McKim-led mission to East Asia would risk exposing “the truth” about forestry in Tasmania, I see little reason for either the government or the forestry sector to oppose it. To keep to his threat, McKim will presumably need to prepare some sort of evidence-based dossier on forestry and conservation, based on actual facts and sound scientific principles rather than innuendo and supposition. Almost by definition this will require him to look beyond his usual set of faith-based advisors and wilfully ignorant anti-forestry support-base. I am pleasantly surprised that he appears to be prepared to set such a sensible precedent for his party, and can only hope that sooner or later he will adopt the same tactics domestically. Who knows, an outbreak of honesty might one day lead to a wholesale overhaul of his party's anti-sustainability, un-green forestry policies and spare Tasmania further perverse, non-conservation political outcomes. Then again...

17th December 2011 (published in *The Mercury*)

I wonder if the Tyenna tree-sitters and their political masters would see it as hypocritical or merely ironic that they chose to construct their platform from wood? On the one hand, they are demonstrating against the concept of production forestry in Australia's native forests, as though it were illegal and a crime against the environment. On the other hand, they are demonstrating the utility of wood. Where do they think the wood for their 'observer' platform comes from? They might observe that, being plywood, it probably doesn't originate from well-managed and highly regulated Australian native forestry – so they can breathe a small sigh of relief on that count. Just possibly it came from certified Australian radiata or hoop-pine plantations – but if so, the certification scheme is not the one the environmentalists approve of. Far more likely is that the plywood is imported, uncertified and a product of unsustainably – perhaps illegally – logged tropical rainforest. Perhaps we should ask the beleaguered orang utans of Sumatra and Borneo for their observations on the environmentalists' priorities.

26th September 2011 (published in *The Mercury*)

Newspapers love a good controversy, whether it be about foxes, climate change or forestry. It's fashionable for reporters to refer to the 'antis' in these stories as sceptics. But let's not confuse scepticism with denialism. Scepticism is a healthy questioning of one's beliefs, coupled with a willingness to change those in the light of new evidence. It is a product of critical thinking and is something we should all aspire to. Denialism, on the other hand, is a stubborn refusal to alter one's viewpoint despite the evidence. It can become obsessively delusional, leading to conspiracy theories worthy of Iranian president Ahmadinejad. The sad part is that so many other people can get hoodwinked into sharing the delusion, whether it be fox denial, refuting the scientific consensus on climate change, or falling for the simplistic and unscientific arguments of the anti-forestry environmentalists. It's particularly scary that we're apt to vote in governments that are prepared to act on those delusions.

1st September 2011 (published in *The Examiner*)

With the economic viability of native forestry so diminished by the campaigns of environmental fundamentalists, many landholders will be tempted to cut their losses and turn their forested land over to agriculture. But Tasmania has a permanent forest estate policy. Under this policy, there's not much scope for further clearance because so much native forest has already been converted to plantation over the past few years. Any erosion of the policy in order to sanction a renewed spree of clearance would be a particularly perverse non-conservation outcome of the current political process. The deafening silence of the anti-forestry camp on this important issue is telling.

30th August 2011 (*The Mercury*)

Leo Schofield wonders why today's forestry workers can't take a leaf out of the old linotype operators' book from his days as a cadet journalist and 'accept radical change'. But he's asking the wrong question. Linotype machinery was clearly about to be superseded by technological advances in the print-room, but what advance is sweeping today's forestry jobs away? What forestry workers have trouble accepting is the *need* for radical change, when the justification for this is so flimsy and has more to do with the politics of environmentalism than it does with either economics or social and ecological sustainability.

30th August 2011 (*The Mercury*)

Why would a Government promoting a development plan that 'builds on Tasmania's natural advantages' opt to wind back native forestry? And why would a Government that warns the Upper House over 'playing politics' with this issue sign an agreement with the Feds that ties the promise of regional development dollars with this wind-back? In terms of climate, ecology, conservation, regulatory framework, existing forest cover, land tenure and low population, Tasmania is one of the best places in the world to do native forestry – natural advantages don't come much bigger than this. Pretending otherwise is playing politics.

7th August 2011 (*The Mercury*)

There's some real science that's gone into the environmental fundamentalists' stance on native forestry. It's the political science that says that if you keep loudly repeating your fallacies with enough conviction, then eventually the number of influential people who believe you will reach a critical threshold and you'll get your way, despite the perverse outcomes. We would have had a very different, and fundamentally more principled, set of forestry principles for our elected governments to agree to if natural science had held sway instead. In fact we might have elected different governments in the first place.

24th July 2011 (published in *The Advocate* and in *The Examiner*)

Congratulations, so-called forest environmentalists.

You have turned your back on science and critical thinking.

You have chosen to ignore inconvenient truths.

You have been taken in by your own empty rhetoric, and duped many others in the process.

You have engendered an atmosphere of distrust that has poisoned social discourse.

You have demonised those who could contribute most to building a sustainable future for Tasmania.

You have concocted falsehoods to fuel your outrage.

You have conflated environmentalism with ecology.

You have confused forest reservation with conservation.

You have confounded carbon storage with carbon sequestration.

You have assumed that forests never change except at the hands of humans.

You have initiated a transition away from sustainability, not towards it.

You have entrenched short-rotation, chemically-intensive plantation forestry.

You have handed unscrupulous overseas loggers a licence to send their wood our way.

You have all-but destroyed Tasmania's capacity to profit from long-rotation, carbon-sequestering, conservation-compatible, organic native forestry.

You have become blind to the real environmental issues of the day.

And through all of this you have assumed the moral high ground.

Tell me where 'green' comes into all this.

16th June 2011 (*The Mercury*)

The antics of Tasmania's so-called forest environmentalists appear especially ludicrous from afar. I have recently visited Canada and Europe. Without fail, the ecologists that I have met have been at a loss to comprehend why environmentalism in Tasmania is so out of step with the rest of the developed world. Elsewhere, people are demanding greater use of sustainably produced wood in place of imports and greenhouse-intensive alternatives. In Sweden, forest companies are required by the Forest Stewardship Council to conduct regeneration burns because of its ecological benefits. In the UK, the public is rallying in support of the (publicly funded) Forestry Commission, which the cash-strapped conservative government is threatening to downsize or sell off. In Canada, foresters look with envy at the production potential of Tasmania's forests (which grow ten times faster than theirs), while Canadian conservationists look with equal envy at Tasmania's forest practices system, our Regional Forestry Agreement, and our levels of forest reservation.

Waging a war on sustainable native forest management makes no sense in a world in which we all use wood and in which both substitution and the alternative forms of production come with a hefty environmental price-tag. I hope that by now the wider public in Tasmania can see through the rhetoric and recognise the current 'peace' process for what it is: self-interest and opportunism on the part of narrow interest groups, with no real basis in the science of conservation or forest management. It seems grossly unfair – not to mention undemocratic – that the whole of society should be burdened with the ensuing economic, social and environmental costs.

9th March 2011 (*The Mercury*)

As long as the discourse on forestry continues to be framed in terms of a polemic on conservation *versus* production (or jobs, or dollars), our society will remain divided. Those that peddle fear, hatred and ignorance will continue to prosper, and we'll witness more confronting forest practices, either in our own back yard or in somebody else's. A mature and rational society would refuse to swallow the rhetoric, and would recognise that you get the best forestry and conservation outcomes – and reap the social and economic rewards – through integration, not separation.

My vision for the future – sadly not currently on the political agenda – is one in which the relentless drive for more intensive plantation forestry is turned around, through a renewed focus on extensive management of our native forest landscapes coupled with new plantings to rehabilitate degraded agricultural land. That way, we can grow wood and food where each grows best, and still leave room for nature. Either that, or we should all stop consuming wood, while spurning alternative products with a bigger environmental footprint...

7th January 2011 (*The Mercury*)

I wouldn't find Leo Schofield's writings so irritating and patronising if he stuck to what he knows about. In his latest ill-informed piece, he takes yet another swipe at Tasmanian forestry, calling it 'outmoded', as if doing forestry were all about some trite fashion statement designed for his instant gratification. It isn't. It's about supplying the forest products and services that the populace continues to demand, and doing it sustainably over the long term. Fashions change annually but trees take decades or centuries to mature; this calls for continuity of management. Sure, we need to keep incrementally improving forest practices, especially over that short period in the long life of a forest when it is harvested – but on the basis of changes in our scientific understanding and in community expectations, and not, as Schofield would regularly appear to have it, on the basis of fashion or his own whims and fancies. Given continued local and global demand for forest products, I anticipate that rumours of Tasmanian forestry's death, peddled by Schofield and others, have been greatly exaggerated.

3rd January 2011 (*The Mercury*)

I am surprised that after so many years of reporting on Tasmanian forestry matters, Sue Neales still turns out articles that fail to do justice to the complex world in which forestry and foresters operate. Last Saturday's 'talking point' article is no exception. While the 'benevolent and driven' individuals she praises are undoubtedly influential, some critical thinking regarding their contributions towards charting a way forward for forestry and conservation wouldn't go amiss before we canonise them.

Let's start with Greg L'Estrange, whom Neales credits with being a 'positive agent for change' and inducing a 'long-overdue overhaul' of the forestry sector. In steering Gunns

away from native forestry (in Tasmania at least, if not elsewhere), some would say his self-interest coincides with Tasmania's, but there are at least as many conservation cons as there are pros - more in my view - in phasing out native forestry on state forests and substituting their production potential with intensive plantations and imports of often-dubious origin. And let's not forget that his commitment is said to be conditional on a seven-figure government bail-out.

Then there's Bothwell farmer Peter Downie. Good on him for achieving FSC accreditation, but to then so disparagingly contrast this achievement with Forestry Tasmania's lack of FSC accreditation for its statewide operations overlooks the small matter of scale and the fact that under FSC local guidelines, environmental NGOs effectively have the power of veto over accreditation, even when all the ecological sustainability boxes are ticked. Neales fails to mention, too, that the Downies were able to pick and choose which parts of their estate they put forward for FSC certification, and which parts they preferred to manage to other standards. Imagine the cries of greenwashing if FT attempted this! Neales also uses the term 'clearfelling' pejoratively, as though it's some evil sort of native forestry practised only by those who don't have FSC certification, while forsaken by those who do. The truth is that, silviculturally, clearfelling suits some forest types very well, but it doesn't suit those on the Downies' property any more than it suits a high proportion of state forest where FT also practices partial harvesting.

And then there's Jan Cameron. Again, good on her for buying up all those forest assets that Gunns was liquidating. But were they all under threat of 'immediate clearfelling' if she hadn't bought them, as Neales claims? No - some had already been harvested but still evidently had high conservation values; others would have been destined for partial harvesting, or would never have been harvested at all. And while it's fantastic that Cameron chose to add these purchases to the Tasmanian Land Conservancy's portfolio, let's not forget that her generosity has limits, in that this very worthy recipient now has to raise the money to pay her back. And let's remember, too, that TLC's conservation holdings are still an order of magnitude smaller than the area of formal and informal reserves on state forest managed - gratis - by FT.

As one of my forestry professors once said, 'forestry's not rocket science - it's much more complex than that'; to which I could substitute the word 'conservation' for 'forestry' to the same effect. As the quality of public debate in Tasmania amply demonstrates, he certainly had a point.

2nd December 2010 (*The Mercury*)

Paul Lennon is right to call for more certainty for the forestry sector, but I don't believe he's right to characterise the issue as one of 'economy versus environment'. In fact, if the environment really were considered holistically then I doubt we'd be hearing such vociferous calls for an end to native forest logging. To me, the whole premise is a furphy, because we're just deflecting production elsewhere, at higher environmental cost and

quite probably higher economic cost too. Acting locally for the environment has to be done in the context of thinking globally. Expanding plantation forestry, whether in Tasmania's agricultural landscapes or overseas, is not an environmental panacea. You can't boost its credentials just by sticking the word 'sustainable' in front of it, as is the fashion among those promoting the supposed benefits of the Forests Principles. If we were to be a bit less myopic, we might detect growing awareness that peak oil, peak phosphorus and carbon concerns will all converge to change the social and economic landscape dramatically in the next few years. Local, native forestry may even emerge as an environmental obligation rather than something to shun. The question is, as that time approaches, will we still have the capacity to manage these forests sustainably if the sector has been decimated in the mean time?

26th November 2010 (*The Mercury*)

The anti-forestry camp of environmentalists seems to have got itself stuck in an infinite logic loop. It goes something like this: 'we've been shouting about how bad native forestry is for so long that native forestry must be *really* bad or we wouldn't have been shouting about it for so long, and if native forestry's really that bad, then we'd better keep shouting about it all the louder...' The outrage itself seems to have become the motivation for further outrage, detached from the big-picture reality of what well-managed native forestry is *really* like. How ironic, then, that this camp seems set to have so much sway over Tasmania's future direction. The rest of us may have to live with a forests agreement that will see the phasing out of an industry that has more potential for environmental sustainability than perhaps any other. There's a measure of hypocrisy in this vociferous minority now bending the government's ear over this issue, since it's not long ago that they were so loudly indignant over the unseemly influence of pulp-mill protagonists on government policy.

20th November 2010 (published in *New Scientist*)

Whatever the actual or perceived health benefits of pet ownership to owners (Hal Herzog, *Opinion*, 8 Nov), a more comprehensive evaluation would consider the many costs borne by the rest of society. This is particularly so for dogs and cats. For instance, our taxes are diverted from other worthy causes to pay for the infrastructure that pet-ownership demands (dog-walking areas, dog-poo dispensers, nuisance animal officers, stray-animal pounds and dog-awareness educational programmes, to name a few). There are societal health costs too in lost sleep and raised stress levels from inanelly barking dogs, and from bites, scratches, dander allergies and asthma attacks and their treatment. Then there's the sheer nuisance value of unwanted encounters with boisterous pets or with pet faeces, or with routinely having to factor-in measures to avoid such encounters. Dogs and cats can also take a huge toll on nature, for instance by spreading pet-borne diseases such as toxoplasmosis, by killing or maiming vulnerable wildlife, and by usurping so much habitat by their continual threatening presence. Dog and cat faeces alters the nutrient

status of natural areas, resulting in gross vegetation change; it contaminates storm-water and any water-bodies downstream of their outflows. Farmers can face increased animal husbandry costs in reducing the risk of attacks on, and worrying of, their livestock by dogs. Finally, predatory pets compete with humanity for food by requiring a diet rich in animal protein, further straining our already overcommitted agricultural production systems. Doesn't sound like a very healthy trade-off to me.

18th November 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

How characteristically hypocritical of those crying foul over the pro-native-forestry petition launched by the People of Forestry Tasmania. The forests agreement process has so far denied hundreds of hard-working professional foresters any substantive say in their own destiny or that of the forestry sector at large, despite the wealth of relevant expertise represented among them. It is now crystal-clear to many that the premises on which the agreement is built owe more to anti-forestry prejudice than to any well-grounded concern for good conservation outcomes or for global sustainability; this latest outcry appears to be further evidence of this.

21st October 2010 (*The Mercury*)

Should the current Forest Agreement process come up with a package that can be sold to us all as the Agreement to end all Disagreements, then it may duly win the support of the public and government. But in ecological terms, if the current set of Forest Principles were implemented in full, Tasmania would be the unwitting victim of an unprincipled victory of prejudice, dogmatism, opportunism and naivety over science. If our governments deflect upwards of a billion dollars of our taxes towards trying to make it work (inasmuch as it ever can), I'll want to know what's not being funded as a consequence. If they've really got this sort of money to pass our way, how about spending it on some real Tasmanian environmental and conservation issues? To name a few on my personal wish-list: a comprehensive network of no-take marine conservation areas; a conservation management scheme for private native woodlands and grasslands of high conservation-value (defined on scientific criteria, not as used in this Agreement); development of an environmental code of practice for farmers (like forestry has had for twenty-five years); incentives to encourage farmers to go organic (like most of our much-maligned native forestry); a scheme for rehabilitating wetlands; and an expanded program of active nature-reserve management - including ecological burns, eradication of weeds, control of root-rot fungus and control of feral animals.

12th October 2010 (*The Mercury*)

So the environmental knights of the forestry round table want to see Tasmania's native forestry phased out over thirty years, in their quest for the Holy Grail of peace in our forests. This supposedly virtuous act is ecologically naïve, and threatens to have perverse

environmental consequences. As a conservation biologist, I can't support it. I'm all for peace, but at what price?

For those interested in what the future may entail, consider some of the non-conservation outcomes of the 1999 South East Queensland Forests Agreement, with its 25-year phase-out of native forestry on state land – you can read all about it in a 1997 article by Dr Clive McAlpine from The University of Queensland's Ecology Centre, in the journal *Biological Conservation* vol 134. That Agreement (brokered by many of the same environmental players now involved in the Tasmanian talks) certainly diffused tensions and reduced social polarisation. But science was sidelined, and the region is paying the price in an increasingly polarised ecological landscape instead. The Agreement incorrectly assumes that conservation equals reservation, yet it mainly increased reservation for the least-threatened forest types (wet eucalypt forests and rainforests), while doing nothing for more pressing conservation needs, most of which lie on private land or need to be dealt with at larger spatial scales. In the interim, it has allowed once-only logging of non-reserved state forest, including an *increased* intensity of logging in dry forests, leading to severe long-term ecological degradation with little prospect of public funding for restoration. The Agreement has also put increased pressure on those ecologically more valuable private forests to fill the timber supply gap. But hey, South East Queensland will eventually get more conservation reserves, and will be out of native forestry on state land - so it must be a 'good thing', mustn't it?

Now consider the concession systems of countries such as Indonesia, where the allocated concessions are typically shorter than the length of time it takes for the native forest to fully regenerate after harvest – equivalent to what's eventuated in South East Queensland and what's proposed for Tasmania. In such a situation, promoting sustainable forest management is an uphill struggle – I should know: I worked there in the 1990's. The concessionaire has little incentive to invest beyond the current harvest, and only does so under duress. At best, it's all stick (if the government has the capacity to wield one) and no carrot. Economists dub the usual outcome rent-seeking; I call it asset-stripping. It's the antithesis of sustainability – discounting the future for the sake of the present.

We have to do better than this in Tasmania, but I am not optimistic given the current process. What reasons will the next generation of environmentalists have to thank the present one, when 'the iniquity of the fathers stands to be visited upon their sons'? Will time merely reaffirm the prejudices of the present generation, that conservation and native forestry are at opposite ends of a spectrum of virtue – a self-fulfilling prophecy? Or will the forestry industry and profession somehow muddle through, biding time until native forestry is seen as part of the solution, not the problem?

30th September 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

As the forestry peace talks near some sort of conclusion, we all hope soon to be able to breathe a collective sigh of relief that the 'war' is over. But I ask that the general public be mindful of the underlying, simplistic assumption of 'native forestry bad, plantation

forestry good'. It is not one shared by those in the forestry profession who are aware of the breadth, depth and integrity of the science and management systems underpinning both forestry and conservation in this State. It is also worth noting that plantation forestry is often vilified (including by local conservationists and politicians) because of its use of pesticides, herbicides and agricultural land. What I am suggesting is that the debate on (or war against?) forestry won't go away when these talks are over, even if the goalposts shift. This is something we could usefully bear in mind when considering whether these talks deliver a sensible outcome for our industry, environment and sense of social cohesion.

8th September 2010 (*The Mercury*)

There are many legitimate reasons to value the western rainforests and tall wet eucalypt forests, but maybe somebody needs to tell the devils that from now on they also comprise prime habitat for this threatened species, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. While devils can occupy most terrestrial habitats beyond the urban fringe, they prefer more open and productive country (including, in my experience, game-rich forestry coupes). It's telling that those making such pronouncements are not respected ecologists but people with – excuse the pun – an anti-forestry axe to grind.

7th September 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

When it comes to our native forest assets, we really are the Lucky State in the Lucky Country. Not only do we have enough of the stuff to lock-in a world-class conservation reserve system, there's ample public forest left over to be managed sustainably to help meet society's demands for wood products. There are many ironies in the current debate over the fate of these forests. One is that, unless the demands for wood products magically melt away, the pressure to intensify production will rise as the area available for production shrinks, requiring the application of more confronting forestry practices and leaving less wiggle-room for integrating conservation. Paradoxically, it seems inevitable that this will deliver us an increasingly polarised landscape that is the very antithesis of good conservation practice. Is this really what we want from our public forests?

28th August 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

If you think it makes sense for Australia to supply its own wood needs rather than increasing imports from our tropical neighbours; if you think it makes sense to recognise that native forest harvesting and regeneration is not the same as forest destruction; if you think it makes sense for forestry to be increasingly in tune with nature and to minimise the use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers; if you think it makes sense for local forestry to be subject to one of the strictest and most comprehensive codes of practice in the world; if you think it makes sense to prioritise reservation of rare forest types in

Tasmania over reserving more and more of the same common ones; if you think it makes sense to give more credence to science and facts over innuendo and raw, negative emotion; if you think...then it makes sense to embrace the concept of native forestry in our state forests and to reject its vilification.

12th August 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

Like many of my colleagues at Forestry Tasmania, and as a conservation biologist, I am deeply concerned about climate change. But I won't be participating in the forthcoming Walk against Warming. My reasons? One of the rallying cries for the Walk is 'cut emissions, not forests'. This may make for a nice feel-good slogan, but it's a false dichotomy, and smacks of deep hypocrisy. Native forestry is far from being the pariah industry that so-called environmentalists have enjoyed portraying it as. For a start, it's about nurturing and sustaining forests over the long term as much as it is about cutting them down. Given a fair go (which it's not getting at the moment), native forestry could be part of the solution to global warming, rather than the problem it's perceived to be. And it's one that can come at a much lower cost to the planet than the energy-intensive alternatives of more plantation forestry, more imports from afar, and greater use of non-renewable alternatives to wood products.

1st August 2010 (*The Mercury*)

So Leo Schofield denies the existence of foxes in 'his' Tasmania. Healthy scepticism is a good thing for society, but blinkered denial in the face of accumulating evidence defies reason and sniffs of arrogance, ignorance and bigotry. Trite dismissal of the fox threat is not part of 'my' Tasmania, Mr Schofield, nor will it serve much value for the natural world that's so eminently under threat here from this feral predator.

14th July 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

All credit to the Downies for their adoption of such an enlightened approach to forestry and conservation on a designated part of their 6500-hectare Central Highlands property. They have achieved accolades from the normally sceptical media, acceptance from normally hostile environmental groups and accreditation under an internationally respected certification scheme. Now why can't Forestry Tasmania manage the entire 1.5 million-hectare State Forest estate this way? For instance, why can't harvesting of our dry forests be by selective logging - like the Downies propose? Why can't half of the estate - including most of the old-growth - be excluded from production, like on the designated part of the Downie property? Why can't they have in place publicly available forest management plans that demonstrate a long-term commitment to sustainable forestry - like the Downies have? And in recognition of this commitment, why don't they have accreditation under an internationally respected certification scheme - like the Downies have? Perhaps surprisingly for many readers, the answer to each of these

questions is that they do, and have done so for years. While my portrayal outlined in this comparison is clearly simplistic, it nevertheless suggests to me that it's time for the media to apply the same perception filter in their relationship with FT's activities as they have done with the Downies.

17th June 2010 (*The Mercury*)

I long for the day when there's an Australian political party – the 'Sensible Greens' party, perhaps? – that develops all its policies consistent with a philosophy that recognises that all nations share responsibility for sustaining the planet's natural resources and life-support systems. Come such a day, native forestry in Australia would be seen by this party as part of the solution – albeit one in need of an appropriate policy framework – and not as a problem to be simply wished away overseas.

5th June 2010 (*The Mercury*)

I find the current focus of the forestry debate on high-conservation-value forests ecologically unhelpful, albeit politically expedient for some. Does it imply that all other native forests are of low conservation-value and can be managed accordingly? If the agenda really is about nature conservation, then this seems like dangerous thinking that may deliver perverse outcomes. Nature doesn't polarise like this. From my perspective as a conservation biologist, the conservation values of our native forests extend throughout, changing over space and time in response to natural processes such as fire and regeneration. Reservation, while important, seldom ensures preservation, and is but one element of an effective conservation strategy. And given the extent of the existing reserve network in Tasmania, simply allocating more forest to reserves may deliver increasingly marginal conservation benefits. No, managing conservation values calls for a more sophisticated approach. It requires ensuring that the landscape as a whole remains ecologically resilient in the face of our management activities. Production forestry is but one land-use that can sit comfortably within this framework - if we do it well enough. Recognising this would allow an ecologically more meaningful debate centred on determining what types and levels of forestry activity are compatible with maintaining conservation values across our native forest estate.

13th May 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

When it comes to dodgy firewood dealers, it's not only consumers that may be ripped off (The Mercury, 13 May) - nature often is too, though this isn't factored into the price paid. In many countries land is dedicated specifically to grow firewood, but here it is generally derived from native bush or paddock trees, or salvaged from forestry operations. Collection regulations exist and are followed by reputable dealers; even so, much wood-hooking in native bush involves felling dead trees or sawing up fallen logs, on the assumption that these will otherwise go to 'waste'. Yet research and experience

worldwide demonstrate that old trees and logs are teeming with wildlife, much of which cannot live elsewhere; its progressive depletion from Tasmania's bush seriously jeopardises a wide range of species, from stag-beetles to quolls. The time has come for consumers concerned about the impact of their use of firewood to request evidence of its origin, and to refuse it if it appears to come from an unscrupulous or ecologically unsound source.

20th April 2010 (published in *The Mercury*)

Fires destroy - and can pollute our air - but they also renew. Natural eucalypt forests depend on bushfires for their regeneration. No bushfires - no regeneration of eucalypt forest. Management of native eucalypt forest, whether for wildlife conservation or timber or both, likewise depends on fire. No ecological or regeneration burns - no regeneration of eucalypt forest. In wet eucalypt country, the differences between bushfires and regeneration burns matter much less to most species living there than whether or not the forest burns.

25th March 2010 (*The Mercury*)

I have recently been receiving treatment for acute leukaemia as an in-patient at the Royal Hobart Hospital. I have been overawed by the complexity of the treatment programme, and humbled by the extraordinary qualities of the many, many RHH staff in coordinating and implementing it. Their professionalism, competence, grace, courteousness and sheer good humour is exemplary. Additional support from the Leukaemia Foundation has been both touching and highly practical. I thank all involved, from the bottom of my heart.

8th July 2008 (published in *The Mercury*)

By what right does the catholic church (lower case intended) claim ownership of our youth? Why is World Youth Day not World Catholic Youth Day? Or, since not all youth will be mature enough to decide for themselves whether or not the tenets of the catholic (or any other) faith are plausible, why not World Youth of Catholic Upbringing Day? Why are the rest of us so accepting of this ambit claim, and why are the media so complicit in promoting the church powerbrokers' blatant marketing ploy? In the interests of balance, I think it's time we all got behind a World Pasta Day in honour of the pastafarians amongst us and the equally plausible Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

21st May 2005 (*New Scientist*)

The juxtaposition of two letters in your 23 April edition ('too many farms' and 'too many mouths') got me thinking about ecological footprints. GM crops take up less space than

organic crops. Our overall global impact is ultimately dependent on our population levels. Put the two ideas together and we may have a solution: if we want a planet with plenty of resources left over for non-humans, perhaps we should spurn vegetarianism but embrace organic farming. The logic? Free-range cattle (or name your beast of preference) take up lots of land that could otherwise produce far more crops, especially if the crops were GM. If these food habits limit the planet's human population carrying capacity, then humanity would be demanding considerably less of the planet: we would have a lower ecological footprint. Though our food production might not be very space-efficient, these extensive mixed farming systems - even rangeland - would harbour more wildlife than the same area of intensive cropland. More importantly, the planet's lower carrying capacity for humanity under such a farming system would restrict our overall levels of consumption of the planet's other resources: fossil fuels, minerals, trees, clean water. The alternative: human populations keep growing until every productive square centimetre of land is devoted to intensive, GM-dominated crop production, with everywhere else given over to housing us or supplying our non-food resources. Following this logic, human development programmes should involve a judicious mixture of tackling inequality (in land, wealth and health), promoting organic farming and the three r's (reduce, re-use, recycle), encouraging population stabilisation, and establishing and maintaining conservation areas. Easy!

9th February 2004 (*Mercury*)

So we now have 'noble pioneers' who respected and looked after our forests before the rapacious timber industry monopolised the resource (Neil Cremasco, Letters, Feb 9th). Would those be the same pioneers whose contemporaries, the noble mariners, were respecting the whales, fur seals and oyster beds? Sounds like a myth to me. Down the ages and across societies, people have tended to exploit natural resources to the limits of their technology if - like our forest pioneers - they had few other immediate survival options. Today we have vastly more sophisticated technology than our forebears that would allow us to ruthlessly exploit what's left of those resources. But unlike previous generations, there is a growing concern for 'sustainability': our relative affluence allows us to think of future supplies, future generations, and indeed other life-forms sharing the planet beyond present-day human needs or desires. Whether we approve of current forestry practices or not, they are streets ahead of our predecessors in the sustainability stakes. It's just that they're now on a scale that makes them so much more visible in the landscape by those whose main connection with forestry is as detached consumer of forest products rather than as supplier of labour.

There is however one big caveat, which makes me think that maybe it's time for conservationists to focus more on the demand side of the sustainability argument ('reduce, reuse, recycle') rather than the supply side. Today's sustainable forest management depends more on fossil fuels than ever before. Those pioneers used their own muscle-power where now we use machines. We know our use of fossil fuels is unsustainable. If the Commonwealth is prepared to contemplate offering greenhouse abatement dollars in

support of using native forest harvesting residue to generate 'green' electricity, the forestry industry should also be gearing up to one day having to pay the Commonwealth greenhouse taxes for its heavy reliance on fossil fuels (as should the rest of us). Imagine how different the economics of Tasmanian forestry would be if fossil fuel prices were to double or treble. Would it still be economically viable to export bulky unprocessed forest products half way round the world? Would it still make economic sense to bulldoze new forestry roads into currently unroaded areas? Would interstate or international tourists still be able to afford to travel to marvel at Tasmania's old-growth forests? And could any of us still afford to consume forest products in such vast quantities as though there were no tomorrow?