



The Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission

The Tasmanian Forestry Debate

DISCUSSION PAPER

INTRODUCTION

The Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission made the decision to release a Discussion Paper on the forestry in Tasmania for a number of reasons. In doing so, we seek like ordinary Tasmanians, particularly Catholic Tasmanians, to understand what is best for our state, both now and for future generations. We find an understanding difficult to come by amid the hostility and entrenched positions that characterise the debate.

We want to:

- ✚ Respond in a real and valuable way to environmental issues in the light of our responsibility to uphold the integrity of creation and the call of our Church to ecological conversion.
- ✚ Understand for ourselves as Catholics how our Church's teaching is to be applied in Tasmania to forestry, especially in light of the long-standing tension around this issue.
- ✚ Help to promote the best possible outcome for all Tasmanians, both now and in the future, through encouraging and facilitating a process of dialogue among the various interest groups.
- ✚ Facilitate an ecumenical conversation between ourselves and fellow Christians so that we can better work together to find ways to engage with this issue in a positive and meaningful way for Tasmania and Tasmanians.
- ✚ Encourage accountable and transparent practices so that it is easier to access information about forestry in Tasmania and thereby contribute to the debate in an informed way. We believe a strong democracy is dependent upon the ability of its citizens to actively participate in dialogue and debate through having access to information from all sides.

As part of the Commission's mandate to further the cause of justice and peace, we often explore and comment upon issues that pertain to Catholic Social Teaching. In this particular case we were prompted by Pope John Paul II and his call to "ecological conversion". The Pope has been very clear over a number of years about his concern for the environment and about the role the Church and its people are called to play in ensuring that the environment is respected and preserved. The Pope's stance was endorsed and further developed by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in their 2002 Social Justice Sunday Statement, *A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge*. The Statement called on all Christians to be reconciled with creation and to undertake our responsibility of stewardship by examining our lives and the ways in which we have harmed creation through what we have done and failed to do. The Statement made crucial reference to the "work of conservation" as an important part of this reconciliation.

Most fundamentally, our concern for the environment comes out of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, built up over many centuries.

Catholic Social Teaching is not prescriptive but gives general principles to guide our thinking and our action. Application of these principles requires reflection, the weighing up of conflicting demands, discussion, consultation and the development of a wider understanding of the issues. We are called to act according to our conscience but we need to do this in a way that upholds the wellbeing of the whole community – the common good. We are asked to consider issues in the light of broad principles

relating to justice and peace, to form judgements based upon these principles, and then to act according to our judgements.

As Catholics, we are called to act for peace through upholding the integrity of creation, defending life, preserving biodiversity, rejecting violence and acting non-violently. We are called to work for justice through sharing wealth and resources, standing in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable throughout the world, upholding the dignity of human life, promoting the common good and asserting the human rights of all people, both now and into the future.

We believe that in order for Tasmania to be able to confront this issue and resolve its legacy of bitterness and division, the following problems must be addressed:

- ✧ The divisive nature of the debate. This has led to a polarisation of views that leaves some participants angry and frustrated.
- ✧ The difficulties in obtaining information and the implications of this. We found it very hard to get objective, independent, clear responses to many of the questions we asked, particularly with regard to precise employment figures and profitability.
- ✧ Too often this debate is wrongly characterised as being about jobs versus trees. How can we find a way, together, with respect and dignity for all points of view, to have both?

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The forestry debate holds a significant place in Tasmanian public life. Anyone who has lived in Tasmania in recent years will know that the forestry debate is an issue that sharply divides Tasmanians. Very few Tasmanians would not have an opinion on it. For those who have committed opinions, the division is almost absolute.

At its meeting on 10 August 2002, the Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission invited a leading conservationist and a senior executive at Forestry Tasmania to speak on the issue of forestry. Both speakers were well-known Tasmanian Catholics. The Commission wanted to hear from both sides of the debate, and each representative gave a passionate presentation, providing their own views on Tasmanian forestry and its implications. Their views were starkly contrasting.

Following the meeting, and the release of the 2002 Social Justice Sunday Statement, the Commission moved to engage more deeply with the specific issue of forestry. We formulated a series of questions on forestry in Tasmania, with which we aimed to clarify some areas of confusion, particularly around the issues of employment and the long-term sustainability of the industry. Copies of these questions were sent, with a covering letter, to 17 groups whom we perceived to be major stakeholders in the issue and who each had an important perspective to offer. The recipients included conservationist groups, industry representatives and all sides of government.

We asked questions about the following issues:

- ✧ **The value, economic, social and environmental, of the forestry industry to Tasmania**
- ✧ **The definition, extent and protection status of Tasmania's old growth forest**
- ✧ **The effect of forestry on ecosystems**

- ✎ The quality control procedures and processes within the industry
- ✎ Employment figures and the structure of employment within the forestry industry
- ✎ The current and future possibilities of employment in the tourism industry
- ✎ The likely future for Tasmania's forestry workers if any major change in policy forced them out of work
- ✎ The long-term sustainability of the industry

The response to our questions was mixed. We were advised that the level of detail we had requested was too great for many groups with limited resources to cope with, but that they would send us what they had. Other groups were able to send us detailed responses to our questions. We received masses of background material, including information that had been produced during the development of the Regional Forest Agreement. Some groups were hostile in their response, suggesting that our motives were suspect and accusing us of bias; most were supportive of our process of inquiry and only wished that their arguments be heard and respected. Many of our specific questions were unanswered because the information we were requesting was simply not available or was so contested it was impossible to ascertain the truth.

We would like to thank all those who sent us material, and spent time with us to help us to understand the complexity of the issue and how it impacts on the everyday life of Tasmanians. We received written responses from both sides of the forestry divide. The pressures of space mean that people's responses, arguments and stated beliefs cannot be reproduced in full, or even in part. Instead, we have tried to draw out the central themes that emerged from the material we received, in an attempt to illuminate some of the complexity and the pertinent issues that lie at the heart of this debate.

THE THEMES THAT EMERGED

- ✎ The debate is an old one. Forest industry bodies claim that the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) and its volume of background material addressed the problems and provided for a secure, sustainable future through its establishment of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. Yet conservationist groups remain unhappy with the RFA, claiming it is fundamentally flawed, fails to protect important conservation sites, is biased towards the logging industry and has been the subject of much dissatisfaction within the scientific community. Conservationists also express concern that the RFA caters more for commercial sustainability than environmental sustainability.
- ✎ A key issue in the debate is that of old growth forest, and how much of it is or is not in danger of being destroyed. Unfortunately, discussions about old growth forest are definition specific – when various groups define “old growth forest” in substantially different ways, of course it is impossible to reconcile their various claims about the level of protection given to old growth forest. The issue is further complicated by the confusion around what “reserved” actually means. In some reserves for example, mining activity is still permitted, even if logging is not. Not all reserves contain forest ecosystems. This is an issue of terminology and definitions, and a clear, open and frank debate cannot be had within the wider community while such confusion remains.
- ✎ In our questions to stakeholders, the Commission requested specific information regarding industry profits, wood chipping and employment. We asked for particular statistics, broken down according to specialisations, years, branches of industry and other categories. Unfortunately, this information, which we believe is vital to understanding the complexity of the issue and all of its components, is unavailable for the asking. Much of the data is only available in aggregate form; other data is simply incomplete. Some data is not publicly available at all.

- ✧ Another important focus for debate is clear felling. The industry believes clear felling is environmentally sustainable in the long term. (It is also worth pointing out that industry groups are engaged in ongoing research into alternative harvesting methods to clear felling and its associated activities, such as the use of 1080 poison to control grazing animals). Conservationist groups do not believe that clear felling is environmentally sustainable, pointing out that in the long-term it is untested. There were also concerns expressed that clear-felling represents an inappropriate harvesting method for slow-growing special species, leading to a glut in the market followed by a dearth of suitable timber and therefore inevitable incursions into protected areas.
- ✧ We had included questions related particularly to tourism because conservation groups have often touted tourism as the answer to Tasmania's dilemma around forestry. But is tourism-based employment long-term and sustainable, and is it realistic to expect huge expansions in tourist numbers based on the cessation of old-growth logging?
- ✧ Employment is a big issue in Tasmania, inside and outside the environmental debate. The Commission's own interest in unemployment is reflected in our production in late 2003 of an Unemployment Issues Sheet. ABS statistics collected by one organisation show a trend of falling job numbers in the forestry industry in Tasmania, particularly in the wood and paper products area. (Some industry groups have disputed this data). Both sides of the argument are eager to blame the other: is the cause of lost jobs and small timber business decline the result of a fundamental flaw in industry structure, or the result of resource diversion and anxiety caused by the continual questioning of the industry in Tasmania? Here the Commission had hoped that precise statistics, covering all aspects of the industry, would be available, and would help us find a way through the debate. We were overly optimistic, and we were ultimately disappointed.
- ✧ One issue raised by the conservationists was the tendency of industry bodies to accuse them of being out to destroy the entire industry, rather than just to bring an end to certain practices, such as logging in old-growth forests or the use of 1080 poison. We did notice evidence of this tendency in responses we received. However, we were also made aware of the vulnerability felt by smaller family businesses to any further changes or restrictions, and their very real concerns for the ongoing survival of their local communities.
- ✧ One conclusion the Commission has drawn, both as a result of the responses it has received and its background research, is that much of the language used in this debate is unhelpful. It is a language of confrontation, of us and them and right and wrong. Both sides use emotionally manipulative images and language. Anyone doubting the level of invective that can dominate in this debate is advised to read the letters page of their local paper, or do some looking around on the internet at websites that consider this issue. Language and attitudes such as those that persist in this debate serve to alienate, to harden hearts, to freeze out any thought of dialogue. Much of the debate appears to lie in what is pure and simple a conflict of values: conservationists value the intangible – beauty, for example – over the economic. For the industry, forestry is an agricultural crop like any other. Yet this is an overly simplistic way of considering the issue: there would be many in the industry who regard beauty as important and many conservationists who agree that a sustainable timber industry is vital to the state's wellbeing. The hostility inherent in the debate obscures this possibility for harmony and conciliation.
- ✧ One respondent expressed concern that the Forest Practices System lacks a public participation mechanism, unlike the independent regulatory system covering land and resources development, the Resource Management and Planning System. They were also concerned about the minimal separation between the policy, regulatory and commercial functions of the forestry industry as

Forestry Tasmania has a significant role to play in all three; the exemption of the RFA from Commonwealth environmental protection legislation; perceived potential for conflicts of interest on the regulatory body, the Forest Practices Board; and the fact that the Forest Practices Code is formulated by and for the industry, and enforced by the industry.

- ✂ A range of other issues emerged, less prominently, in the responses we received. They include the issue of logging in water catchment areas; the impact the current situation has – good or bad – on bee keeping or craft-wood based industries; the issue of Aboriginal traditional ownership; and the problem of firewood collection. This latter is often done informally by people who lack adequate access to other forms of heating, but can occur in high-conservation value forests.
- ✂ One response referred to the bigger picture: how is Tasmania’s industry, and our right to do as we please here in Tasmania, to be considered in the context of the global situation, global demand for wood and wood products, and global forestry practices, particularly in the third world.
- ✂ Surprisingly, the issue of a landowner’s right to control what happens on privately owned land did not emerge as a major issue of concern, despite ongoing public controversy over this issue.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

From the responses we received, and our own considerations of the issue in light of Catholic Social Teaching, there are two issues in particular that we would like to highlight. These issues raise important questions about the debate, and they are questions that require answers.

First, through the confusion, lack of information, intolerance of new participants in the debate and aggressive discourse that has become an inevitable part of discussions about the forestry issue, many ordinary Tasmanians have been silenced. This silencing is helped along by three important factors.

Exclusion from the planning regime: Because forestry operations are not part of the normal planning regime for land and resource development, the public are not given official avenues to have their say about harvesting decisions. Consequently, Tasmanians lack control over the use of forests that belong to all Tasmanians, and their voices are not heard.

Freedom of Information: Certain aspects of Forestry Tasmania’s operations are exempt from Freedom of Information enquiries. This makes it very difficult to obtain accurate information that can then be used to inform debate. Unless commercial restrictions apply, there seems no clear reason why this information would be exempt, unless it is to shut people out of the debate.

Independence of Government: The responsibility of Tasmania’s State Government, and of any democratic government, is to govern, on behalf of the people, for the common good, to make decisions to benefit the whole community and enhance the dignity and integrity of all creation, now and into the future. To do so effectively, it must work independently of all vested interests and at the present time, in perception if not reality, this is not the case. In particular, the State Government has a responsibility to ensure citizens have access to sufficient information to examine thoroughly and properly all the issues surrounding forestry in Tasmania.

Second, this debate is not about a black and white choice between timber workers’ jobs and old growth forest coups. It is possible to have both sustainable employment and appropriate conservation and

protection of our wilderness. The nature of the debate, with its emotional use of trees or the plight of workers to score points, means this possibility is often forgotten, or ignored, or dismissed. Yet it is the recognition of that possibility, and the commitment to see it realised, that is essential to the finding and keeping of common ground.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As a Catholic organisation, the Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, like Catholics everywhere, is obliged to be active in informing ourselves on justice issues. We are called to defend and preserve the integrity of creation. Equally, we are called to respect the dignity of human beings and the right to work. In this light, we ask of Catholics and of all Tasmanians, the following questions.

- ✚ Do we Tasmanians accept our responsibility to participate in decision-making and challenge governments to work for the common good?
- ✚ Do all Tasmanians have access to adequate information on this issue that is free from bias and reader-friendly, so that they can contribute to the debate in an informed and helpful way?
- ✚ How can Tasmanians talk to each other about this issue without rancour and insult, in ways that are respectful and mindful of each other's views and feelings and promote fair and just outcomes?
- ✚ Is the greed of a few taking priority over the common good in Tasmania's forestry industry?
- ✚ In what ways can we, locally and globally, promote the use of our earth's resources more wisely rather than wastefully?
- ✚ Do we have an appropriate sense of awe for the grandeur, balance, connectedness and beauty of God's creation?
- ✚ Do we have a concern for future generations and their right not only to have access to resources but also to inherit undamaged the full richness of creation?

We of the Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission are not experts, but we are Tasmanians, and we are concerned. Whatever the answers are to our questions, Tasmania is too small to be divided over this or any other issue. We need to start talking to each other, and we need to start listening to each other. We need to do so with respect for each other's position, empathy for each other's value system, and a willingness to give each other second, third and fourth chances. We need to want to make this better for the sake of all Tasmanians.

APPENDIX: STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

We sent copies of our questions on forestry, with a covering letter explaining why we were doing so, to representatives of the following organisations:

Catholic Earthcare*
 The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union*
 The Environmental Defenders' Office
 The Forest Industries Association of Tasmania*
 Forestry Tasmania
 Gunns Ltd
 Norske Skog*
 Office of Senator Bob Brown*
 The Tasmanian Conservation Trust*
 Tasmanian Country Sawmillers' Federation Ltd
 Tasmanian Forests and Forestry Industry Council*
 The Tasmanian Greens
 The Tasmanian Liberal Party
 The Tasmanian State Government
 Timber Communities Australia
 Timberworkers for Forests
 The Wilderness Society

*We received no formal written response from representatives to our questions.

If you would like further information about Catholic Social Teaching, on the environment, on unemployment or on any other issue, or have any questions about the consultation process the Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission undertook to prepare this document, please feel free to contact the Commission.

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