

RESPONSE TO PAUL MURRAY OPINION PIECE

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In the *West Australian* newspaper this Saturday occasional columnist and the former editor of the *West Australian*, Paul Murray, unleashed a full broadside on the McGowan Government's decision to stop the logging of WA's native forests by 2024.

This decision, which was greeted with almost universal acclaim when it was announced last year, has attracted Murray's ire, ostensibly at 'the loss of wood fired pizza and soil improvers for domestic gardeners.'

'Did anyone think about them when they cheered the McGowan government's bombshell announcement last year,' Murray muses.

Granted, these were not his only criticisms, but the fact that he chose to place both in the opening two sentences of his long and rambling piece is illustrative of the flimsiness of his wider argument.

Of course, a lot of time has passed since Paul Murray resigned his position as editor of *The West Australian* in 2000. In the two decades that have since passed, the well worn arguments that the destruction of our native forests somehow underpin WA's economic stability have been disproven and discredited.

But it is important to stress how wrong he is on his most basic assumption – that the logging of our native forests was somehow delivering value-added benefits to our economy. The sad fact is that the vast majority of our native jarrah, karri, marri and wandoo were being torn down for little more than low value wood chips, firewood and charcoal. Only 15 per cent of the wood sold actually became timber for building furniture or fine woodcraft, while around half of all material felled is left behind and burned.

To call native forest logging wasteful would be a dramatic understatement.

It is a wastefulness that is unsustainable. Over the past 150 years, more than 90 per cent of all the forests and woodland in the South West of WA have been logged or cleared with massive impacts on wildlife, biodiversity and the ability of the soil to sustain plant life. The UWA Water Research Centre has shown that more than 50 per cent of rain fall decline in the South West is directly attributed to land clearing. The overall ecological health of the region has taken a sustained beating from which it may never recover. The priority in the state government's decision to ban native forest logging in WA was simply to preserve and protect what is left.

It was a move that received overwhelming support – not just from those in the suburbs, as Murray suggests – but from the very communities which have, traditionally, been at the heart of native forest logging.

From a government survey of nearly 17,000 people, carefully weighted as a representative sample, 95 per cent said that more areas of native forest should be protected. 73 per cent of respondents went even further, saying that no native forest logging should occur. Zero.

What Paul Murray either fails to see or neglects to report is the overwhelming community consensus upon which the native logging ban sits. The move was hardly the action of a government imposing its will upon a reluctant and unwilling public, quite the opposite. It was the action of a government operating under a strong mandate from the people it is appointed to represent.

For the WA state government, it was also an opportunity to cut its losses on an industry which had consistently received more financial support than it had generated in profit. WA's Forest Products Commission – the body responsible for native logging in the state – has posted repeated financial losses from its native forest logging operations amid declining production volumes, declining quality of timber output and declining yields per hectare logged. It is important to stress that these trends were all well established long before the move to stop native forest logging in WA.

The pattern of decline is the same across Australia. Native forestry operations in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania are each propped up by government subsidies, all at an enormous cost to the tax payer. Far from bringing about a premature end to an industry in its prime, WA is in fact leading the way in transitioning away from a wasteful, outdated and loss making enterprise which had become almost entirely dependent on public money.

This is a view shared by business leaders in the South West. The Regional Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA; the Pemberton Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Noongar Chamber of Commerce and Industry have all called for protections of our native forests. This desire for change is not prescriptive, but comes from each organisations' members, who insist that the survival of our native forests is crucial to the well being of their businesses.

In essence, these communities recognise that the trees are worth far more left standing than they are as low-value wood products. A tonne of jarrah honey will retail for approximately \$30,000 dollars. A tonne of jarrah firewood will retail for approximately \$300 dollars. Not only that, but business models like fine food production, production of native flower seeds and seedlings and tourism are sustainable. The same cannot be said of the native logging for firewood, with areas taking at least 100 years to mature to the point where a second round of felling of decent sized timber can take place. Even then, we still do not know how long it would take for those areas to reach the same standard of biodiversity and ecosystem health and complexity – perhaps several thousands of years, or indeed never in the changed climate conditions.

These forests are valuable too as we continue to adapt to the new and serious challenges of climate change. Forests are an integral part of the climate system, bringing much needed rain and temperature moderation, and removing carbon pollution from the atmosphere. Western Australia is the only state in which greenhouse gas emissions have risen since 2005, during which time approximately 120,000 hectares of publicly owned jarrah and karri forests have been logged or cleared. It will take at least 150 years for newly planted trees to reach 90 per cent of the original forest's carbon carrying capacity.

It is blatantly unsustainable for our state to continue to increase emissions while simultaneously destroying the major naturally occurring ally we have to prevent irreversible climate damage. Protecting our native forests has the potential to prevent 40-60 million tonnes of CO₂ from being emitted over the next ten years. This is equivalent to taking 1.2 million cars off the road.

In our South West communities – which are already seeing the effects of climate change through more frequent and fierce bushfires – climate resilience and adaptation are dependent on the protection of our remaining native forests. Land-clearing in the South West has been directly attributed to 62 per cent of the region's rainfall decline. Less rainfall means even the untouched forests are under greater stress and drier vegetation is far more susceptible to bush fires, exacerbating the problem. In short, native forest logging makes bushfires worse and harder to

control. ‘Crown fire’ – the type of bushfire in which tree canopies burn, forming thunderstorms and destructive winds – are far more likely in areas in which native trees have been logged.

It simply isn’t credible to state – as Paul Murray did in the West Australian this week – that the decision to end native forest logging was some kind of bizarre whim. It is a decision based in sound understanding of the true economic, social and ecological cost that would come from prolonging a wasteful and damaging industry.

Rather than lashing out, Paul Murray should join the significant majority of West Australians who are celebrating the decision for what it is – an example of what happens when a government listens to the community and acts in the best interests of all concerned.

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