

## PROPOSAL 4

### Social Justice – Protecting our forests

The Social Justice Board (SJB) propose:

That the Synod:

- Noting the long commitment of the Uniting Church to social, environmental, and intergenerational justice, which is expressed in various Assembly documents and in the Synod of WA's own resolutions on the care of creation and the addressing of climate change and
- reaffirming the importance of resolution 29/2001, which encouraged and challenged individuals and congregations to become advocates for sustainable environmental policies and practices which protect, honour and care for our natural resources
- 1. Endorse the Forests for Life campaign to transition the South West forestry industry away from native forest logging to plantation timber.
- 2. Request the Western Australian State Government to:
  - adequately monitor land clearing activities across the state and make records publicly available, including related greenhouse gas emissions,
  - invest significantly more in the Indigenous Ranger program to care for forests, savannahs and woodlands across the state,
  - devise and implement a strategic plan to redeploy South West native forestry workers in consultation with affected workers and communities,
  - place High Conservation Value Forests in secure National Parks for the survival of threatened species and the protection of water quality and carbon sinks,
  - conserve degraded forests as Future Forests where their ecological values can be restored over time and opportunities for research and education can be provided,
  - negotiate a financial agreement with the Federal Government based on the national climate mitigation benefit to be gained from protecting the State's forests, savannahs and woodlands.

**Mover: David Gray**

**Seconder: David de Kock**

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#### Rationale

In its first public statement in 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia expressed what would be an abiding concern with the wellbeing of the planet for the rights of future generations: we are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

In 1991 the Assembly resolved the following:



“We believe that God loves the divine creation and wills the development of its life. No creature is indifferent in the eyes of God. Each has its dignity and thereby also its right to existence.

The Holy Scriptures attest to God's covenant with the creation. "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature" (Genesis 9:9-10).

...we support the attribution of rights not only to humans but also to nature, God's creation, and we reject the view that animate and inanimate nature are mere objects which stand at the arbitrary disposal of the human...

1. Nature – animate or inanimate – has a right to existence, that is, to preservation and development.
2. Nature has a right to the protection of its eco-systems, species, and populations in their inter-connectedness.
3. Animate nature has a right to the preservation and development of its genetic inheritance.
4. Organisms have a right to a life fit for their species, including procreation within their appropriate ecosystems.
5. Disturbances of nature require a justification. They are only permissible when the presuppositions of the disturbance are determined in a democratically legitimate process and with respect of the rights of nature; when the interests of the disturbance outweigh the interests of a complete protection of the rights of nature; and when the disturbance is not inordinate. Damaged nature is to be restored whenever and wherever possible.
6. Rare ecosystems, and above all those with an abundance of species, are to be placed under absolute protection. The driving of species to extinction is forbidden.”

In 2006 the Assembly also adopted the statement, “For the Sake of the Planet and all its People” which stated that:

“The Uniting Church's commitment to the environment arises out of the Christian belief that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a special relationship with the creation – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God. We believe that God's will for the earth is renewal and reconciliation, not destruction by human beings. The foundational document of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Basis of Union, expressed this as the very heart of the Church's mission: God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end.”

It is the view of the Social Justice Commission (SJC) that, given the uniqueness of the South-West forest ecosystems, the relatively small areas of uncleared forests remaining and the need to mitigate against further damage to the climate system, the remaining South-West forests need to be protected from logging activities. This is for the sake of the plants, animals and natural environment, for the Western Australian community, and for future generations.

This protection would need be phased in as a transition process to ensure that forest industry workers, their families and communities are provided with appropriate, accessible and fair alternative employment options.



The SJC sees secondary benefits to transitioning away from native forest logging, including cost savings and potential gains to the State government, and improved tourism opportunities and marketability for the South West region.

The SJC is also keen to ensure that land clearing in all areas of the state is adequately monitored and regulated to ensure that minimum clearing occurs. Our vast savannah and woodland areas across Western Australia are not only unique and precious of their own accord, but are a valuable carbon sink for the mitigation of climate change.

The SJC acknowledges that all the mentioned areas of forest, woodland and savannahs are Aboriginal lands that have been cared for and managed by Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years. Any further land care needs to be led or advised by the relevant traditional owners and implemented by local Aboriginal people wherever possible.

### Native Forest Timber – Woodchips and Old Growth

Most of the native trees logged in the South West are Karri and Jarrah, plus a growing market for Sandalwood from drier areas. Most of the Karri ends up as woodchips for export to be pulped and Jarrah mostly becomes firewood or charcoal.

Source: Forests Products Commission Annual Report 2013-2014

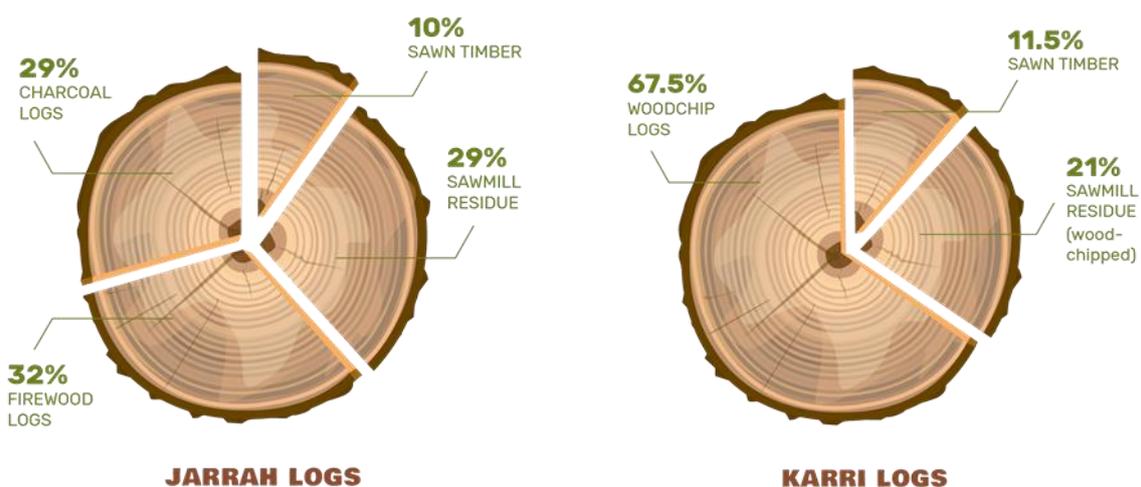


Image courtesy of “Forests For Life”

Despite previous State Government provisions for the protection of “old growth” forests, there has been continued documentation of old trees being felled. This is due to the broad interpretation of the criteria defining “old growth” whereby an area can be excluded from the classification if there is any evidence of logging previously occurring (down to as little as one stump per hectare) or if the area has evidence of dieback. This has resulted in old trees up to 400 and 500 years old being felled with the permission of the Forest Products Commission.

### Biodiversity and Endangered Species

Western Australian landscapes, species and ecosystems are unique and fragile. The South-West of Western Australia is recognised globally as an amazingly rich and complex pocket of nature identified as an international biodiversity hotspot . Out of nearly 8000 native plant species found in the South West botanical province, 79 per cent are endemic to Western



Australia, along with various fauna species that are now listed as threatened or endangered. It is a rare geographic region known as an 'Old, Climatically-Buffered, Infertile Landscape' (OCBIL), which is associated with a variety of unique characteristics and vulnerabilities. Given the cumulative pressures of land clearing, invasive species and predators, forest diseases and climate change, the native South West forests, species and ecosystems are under increasing threat. The SJC believes that we have a moral obligation to do all we can to help protect this special part of God's creation.

Climate change is the latest perturbation to a system under increasing pressure. As Professor of Plant Biology at the University of Western Australia, Stephen Hopper identifies:

“Given that climatic buffering over tens of millions of years has been important to the persistence of OCBIL communities, the spectre of rapid global warming in our time is particularly worrying for the world's OCBIL regions (Malcolm et al. 2006; Midgley and Thuiller 2005; Rull and Vegas-Vilarrubia 2006).

“One only has to reflect upon the recent death of many plants on shallow soils adjacent to granite outcrops in the jarrah forest, wheatbelt and goldfields during summer heatwaves (Hopper unpublished; Yates et al. 2003) to appreciate that persistent global warming will have immediate and dramatic impact locally.”<sup>3</sup>

The impacts of climate change are not restricted to Western Australia's plant species however, with the Climate Commission (2013) identifying that:

“Suitable habitat for a range of iconic [Western Australian] species including the quokka, Carnaby's cockatoo and the tingle tree is likely to be substantially reduced as the climate changes... The ecological value of the southwest region lies in the diversity of plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. The region has the highest concentration of rare and endangered species on the continent... More than 60 endemic vertebrates are found here, including the honey possum, quokka, red-capped parrot (Figure 9), western swamp tortoise and sunset frog. Some of these species, such as the numbat (Figure 9), were once more widespread but have become extinct elsewhere in Australia. Areas particularly rich in endemic plant species include the Fitzgerald River National Park – home to over 1800 plant species of which over 70 are found nowhere else; and the Stirling Range National Park (Figure 10) – home to over 1500 plant species, of which nearly 90 are found nowhere else.”

Protecting the remaining habitat of our vulnerable and unique native flora and fauna is vital for their ongoing survival.

### **Climate Change and Carbon Sequestration**

Not only can the protection of forests benefit plants and animals, but it means the forests can help us in the fight against climate change. The Forests for Life campaign has collated the following research identifying that:

“Native forests remove carbon dioxide from the air more effectively than anything else on land; they make and 'catch' rain and they moderate temperature. (Pan, 2011; Reich, 2013, Carlowicz, 2012; Andrich et al. 2013; Macalpine et al. 2016).

Little, short-lived plants that are eaten or decay quickly release the carbon they have sequestered too soon to be of much use as climate change mitigators. Old, biodiverse forests are the best carbon stores on land (Carlowicz, 2012; Mackey et al., 2009).



Native forest logging is a significant carbon polluter and stopping logging in native forests could automatically achieve 50 per cent of Australia's Kyoto Protocol commitment to reduce emissions by 5 per cent by 2020 (Lindenmayer and Mackey, 2015)"

Land clearing in general, is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. According to The Wilderness Society report "Climate Change and Australia's Tree Clearing Crisis",

"Australian greenhouse gas emissions from the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) sector (which is where tree clearing emissions fall) was... by far the fastest growing in terms of emissions in the Australian economy from 2012–2015 — almost doubling over this period (from 13 Mt CO<sub>2</sub>e to 23 Mt CO<sub>2</sub>e) and growing 11 times faster than any other sector."

While this was largely due to land clearing practices in Queensland, the WA Environmental Protection Authority stated in its last annual report that it is "particularly concerned by the cumulative impact of clearing in the Perth, Peel, Wheatbelt and Pilbara regions." The report goes on to identify that:

"Between 1997 and 2013 more than 2,300 square km [230,000 hectares] of Pilbara land was approved for clearing under the EP Act, with approximately 72 per cent of that area approved in the past five years.

The full extent of clearing in WA is not easily evaluated as no single government agency or department reports on the total approved clearing of native vegetation statewide."

According to the Wilderness Society, "In Western Australia, there is scarce monitoring and reporting on land clearing, with multiple exemptions from clearing regulations making comprehensive figures impossible to obtain. Data is collected on some types of land clearing permits which have been approved, but these figures are not publicly available."

There have been recent proposals for up to 500,000 hectares of clearing for agriculture in the Great Western Woodlands (plus an ongoing battle over mining leases in the Helena Aurora Ranges), 300,000 hectares in the Fitzroy River catchment and an ongoing push for expansion of the Ord River scheme with 13,400 hectares released in Stage 2 and a further 30,000 hectares proposed for use in Stage 3.

At a time when urgent action is needed to address climate change, further clearing of the Western Australian landscape will only add to the problem while retention of forests and woodlands could be part of the solution. Furthermore, if native forest logging was replaced by plantation timber on previously cleared land, there would be a net gain in carbon sequestration capacity.

### **Economy and Employment**

The South West Forestry industry is managed by the Forest Products Commission (FPC), a statutory body of the Western Australian Government. Figures from its annual reporting reveal that for its native forestry operations the FPC has not even been profitable for several years.

The Australia Institute's 2016 report, *Barking up the Wrong Trees*, analysed the finances of the FPC revealing that its native forestry operations "posted a loss for the fourth year in a row." These figures suggest that it would be financially more sustainable to transition the industry to purely plantation timber which has been a consistently profitable component of the FPC operations.



There are disputed claims about the numbers of workers dependent on the industry. The FPC claims that the “Western Australian forest products industry provides direct employment for more than 5,000 Western Australians working in timber-related industries.”

According to the Australia Institute however,

“Employment attributed by the FPC to native forests is 18–21% of total forestry employment... On this basis, the SW forests employ between 170 and 330 people in logging, forestry and support services.”

Regardless of the number of people employed, a transition plan is imperative to ensure that workers and communities have the confidence of secure local employment. Given that the State Government was able to implement an initial forestry transition plan under the Gallop Government, a second comprehensive transition phase could be modelled on the first.

As well as transitioning native forestry into more plantation timber, leaving forests intact can provide impetus for other industries to be strengthened including tourism, recreation and bee-keeping. There are also significant financial benefits possible through the valuation of carbon credits. If the State Government were to negotiate with the Federal Government to have Western Australia’s native forests and woodlands retained under its Carbon Farming Initiative there could be tens or hundreds of millions of dollars available. This is an important element of valuing the climate mitigation benefit of our existing forests and woodlands.

Another important employment consideration is the opportunity to give priority options to Aboriginal people in caring for natural habitat areas. A key example is the Indigenous Ranger Program which can have multiple benefits for Aboriginal people as well as the natural environment. Through such programs Aboriginal people are not only obtaining local employment but their traditional knowledge of caring for country is appreciated and they can maintain a stronger sense of connection to country and culture.

**Mover: Rev David de Kock**

