



Seeing the ocean through the trees in Gunns debate - Tasmania and Gunns

Dr Thomas Moore, oceanographer and senior coastal campaigner at Environment Tasmania, wrote and had published the below response to Stephen Mayne's Gunns Pulp Mill Crikey Article.

Stephen Mayne tries to frame Gunns Pulp Mill as an economic messiah and proven environmental performer, the proponent as suffering under unfair assessment processes and a lack of due recognition for its exit from native forest logging, and environmental advocates as having abandoned their opposition to the mill. On all counts Mayne is wrong. It is disappointing to see someone as journalistically capable as Mayne engaged in this kind of one-sided, inaccurate puffery.

Mayne is right that Tasmania's current budget crisis is hitting hard. More than ever Tasmania needs a resilient, diversified economy. For too long our State has relied on industries that are too big to fail, propped up by the taxpayer. The Tasmanian Round Table for Sustainable Industries Project's 2007 report found that "only subsidies provided by the Australian taxpayer makes the mill profitable" and "on a range of realistic scenarios, the Pulp Mill project may cause an economic loss to the State". Mayne's claim that Tasmania "desperately needs the pulp mill" at best merits significant scrutiny.

The decision by Gunns to exit the logging of native forests in Tasmania was a genuine breakthrough in the decades long forest conflict - one that has been clearly publicly welcomed by environmental groups. But the environment and ecosystem services that support our communities are more than just trees, and the ocean disposal of 23 - 51 GL / year (GL = one billion litres) of industrial effluent has raised significant concerns for the coastal environment, marine industries, and human health.

Effluent would be discharged into Bass Strait via a marine outfall, some 20 kms from the mill and with the immediate idyllic coastline and surrounding Bass Strait waters of remarkable environmental and economic value. Fully accounting for the fate of the over 160 potential "chemicals of interest" in this effluent - including polychlorinated aromatic compounds (dioxins/furans), phytotoxins, resin acids, sterols, and metals such as Mercury - is essential to avoid irreversible damage.

The community and environment groups participated in good faith with the independent State assessment but were blind-sided by the scrapping mid-stream of what was meant to be a rigorous, bilateral, and transparent investigation. In March 2007, without warning and before public hearings were due, Gunns pulled out of the process. It was later revealed that both the State Government and Gunns had been told prior that the Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC), then Tasmania's independent planning umpire, had found the project documentation "critically non-compliant".

One day later the Tasmanian Government announced that "special legislation" would be put forward, tailored specifically for the mill. This new "fast-track" process, swiftly approved by Parliament, assessed the project with reduced rigor. The cascade of assessment and public relations failures that followed were inevitable. There and then the community lost confidence in Gunns and the project. As a brand the Tamar Valley Pulp Mill was damaged irreparably and the responsibility for that failure lies with those leading Gunns and the Tasmanian Government at that time.

With the significant risk of irreversible damage to coastal values we must be absolutely sure that any development like the pulp mill is benign to the environment, other industries, and human health. Mayne claims many pulp mill opponents have "exited the field". I can't think of one. On his visit did Mayne meet with any to discuss their concerns or position? Are his statements based solely on a site visit facilitated by Gunns?

As long as there are valid concerns and inadequate assessments environmental advocates will rightly challenge plans to dispose industrial effluent into our waters. We oppose using our ocean as a dumping ground.

Go to <http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/11/02/mayne-gunns-believes-pulp-mill-approval-is-inevitable-as-it-should-be/> to view Mayne's article.