

Driving a star picket through conservation

Jim Hoggett

Last week I had a call from our local supplier of fencing material. Did we want to buy ironbark fence posts, because they were going out of production immediately, owing to the imminent closure of forests?

It set me thinking. Ironbark fence posts are 35 by 40 mm posts, which are ideal for electric fencing. They are attractive, non-obtrusive and easy to install. They were harvested sustainably in the Pilliga region of NSW along with much greater volumes of cypress pine, a naturally termite-resistant native softwood.

The Pilliga has just been added to the long list of NSW National Parks, which cover almost one-twelfth of NSW. This was despite there already being a large National Park in the Pilliga. The Pilliga forest was one of NSW's first dedicated State forests. It has been sustainably managed for multiple uses for nearly 90 years—that is, nearly as long as the Royal National, Australia's oldest park.

The Pilliga forest is and has been home to a large population of koalas and other endangered species for all that time. The area was already owned and managed by the State, so did not need to be 'saved'. Later, when sufficient unchecked growth of pine and understorey has accumulated, there will be major wildfires which will destroy, then dramatically change, the

ecology that the government sought to preserve.

This park was created by political momentum not ecological need.

The small but viable traditional timber industry of the area will go out of business. It offered permanent employment to a number of local people, including the Aboriginal population, but it is too small to count in the electoral calculus.

Recently we issued an *IPA Background* registering our concern at the rate of Park creation and the apparent lack of care for the National Parks. We questioned strongly the need for further Park declarations and proposed a more creative and flexible approach to existing Park operations. This would make them more user friendly and potentially better managed. It would reduce the risk of the uncontrollable wildfires that destroyed (and effectively cleared) three million hectares of pristine native forest and woodland two years ago—one-quarter of NSW National Parks.

A more creative approach would involve a range of sustainable uses, including limited sustainable native forestry. None of this is revolutionary. Overseas, the multiple use of national parks is commonplace and has been shown to be both practicable and consistent with environmental conservation.

Coincidentally, the NSW Environment Department issued its latest 'State of the Parks' report. This identified numerous, urgent problems indicating a large gap between actual and desired park quality. On the evidence of its own staff, the National Parks and Wildlife Service is clearly struggling with widespread weed infestation, overwhelming numbers of feral animals (foxes, dogs, cats, rabbits, rats, pigs, deer, horses, goats, cat-

tle, donkeys, camels), destructive fires and lack of infrastructure and staff to cope. At the same time, there are serious gaps in information required for Park planning.

Clearly, government has over-promised and under-resourced in a big way. The current ratio of one park ranger to 23,000 hectares is clearly inadequate. Given the focus of attention on the more popular areas such as Kosciusko and the Blue Mountains, it is apparent that there are vast areas of neglected park. In the light of all this, the report concluded rather curiously with proposals for further massive expansion of National Parks. The triumph of hope over experience.

Back to our fence posts. The practicable alternatives to ironbark fence posts are star pickets made of steel or split posts from local timber. Star pickets are less attractive than ironbark, involve significant, environmentally unfriendly processes in their production (mining, energy and greenhouse gases) and are less easy to use. Split posts use ten times the native timber. They are expensive to install and repair, and require barbed wire, which is less effective than electric fencing and can injure domestic and native animals.

So there we have it. Government forces me to substitute an inferior product—operationally and environmentally—for an environmentally friendly item. This is because our Green movement, politicians and bureaucrats have neither the wit nor the will to devise a policy that marries sustainability to conservation. Rather they parrot the old 'lock it up and ask questions later' philosophy, except that we now know this means, 'lock it up and burn later'.

I ordered the ironbark as a last tribute to sustainable native forestry (RIP).

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