

# 'BBC World' Calls 'Timber!' on Credibility

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It seems that small victories are possible against media bias—at least in the UK.

**O**N 5 July 2002, BBC World broadcast *Earth Report: Paper Tiger*, a documentary on the effects of logging in Tasmania. As one would expect, it was a standard propaganda piece, with all the bias one has come to associate with environmental documentaries.

The programme made a number of claims about Tasmania and its forestry industry which it failed to examine or to test. With the editing, there were numerous instances where the vision and the commentary deliberately gave false impressions or where there were repeated errors from previous reports. The programme also dismissed both the efforts of professionals in Tasmania to conserve biological diversity and the published scientific reports confirming the industry's sustainability.

After the broadcast, Mr Barry Chipman, Tasmanian State Coordinator of Timber Communities Australia Limited (TCA)—a body representing families and individuals that work in and depend upon Tasmania's forest industries—complained to the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) in Britain that they had been treated unfairly and unjustly in the programme.

As a result of this formal complaint, the BBC was forced to acknowledge internationally that it broadcast an 'exaggerated', 'misleading', 'inaccurate' and 'unfair' TV documentary about Tasmania's forests. The BSC handed down a 3,500-word ruling on the matter, and BBC

World was obliged to publish a 386-word summary of the findings in the *London Times*. It also had to screen a one-and-a-half-minute television summary of the BSC's findings at the completion of their *Earth Report* programme for 5 days from June 3 this year.

Effectively, the Broadcasting Standards Commission found that the programme had misled viewers. It had 'ignored evidence provided by TCA that Tasmania has 40 per cent of its total land and its forests protected in reserves, with 67 per cent of its rainforest and 95 per cent of its high quality wilderness fully protected on public land'. Nevertheless, and undeterred, the programme compared the land clearance rate with that of 'a poverty-stricken tropical forest nation', deliberately resulting, according to the Commission, in an 'exaggerated portrayal of the extent to which rainforest in Tasmania was exposed to logging'. The ruling also determined that the BBC's claim 'that the Styx was the last stronghold of the *Eucalyptus regnans* involved some gilding of the lily'. It agreed with Chipman that the BBC had inserted 'footage of a burrowing crayfish without on-screen acknowledgement that it was archival, into footage of a harvested coupe, so that it appeared that the crayfish's habitat was in the middle of a clear felled forest site', and it disagreed with the BBC's assertion that the Forest Practices Board 'was run by the timber interests to administer the self-regulating code of practices'.

In effect, the BSC's finding not only vindicated the TCA and the people who depend for their livelihood on the sustainable management of Tasmania's forests, but also those involved in the sound management of forests generally.

Because green advocates seem not to be able to help themselves but be biased in documentaries on environmental issues, the TCA had become an unwilling victim in a war that should not be taking place. Mr Chipman observed, 'This is a battle we would have preferred not to have fought. We believe the media should be fair and balanced in the first place. Journalistic codes of practice ask for journalists to deal in the truth, not just rehashing the lines from green Spin Doctors, based on personal opinion'. Experienced and twice bitten observers of the media know, however, that pigs don't fly.

But at least in Great Britain common sense appears to prevail from time to time. Would that Australia had such a commission to deal with our ('theirs' really) ABC. In this case, the complaint process was not easy, and involved a long battle through the office of the Commission. But the idea of our ABC having to publicly and repeatedly tell us on Channel 2 that 'sorry viewers, we got it wrong' would be delicious. But then, saying sorry, as the ABC has often observed, is not an easy thing to do.

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