

PROPOSAL 5

PROTECTING OUR FORESTS

The Social Justice Commission (SJC):

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 and the 2017 Synod resolution to monitor land clearing and restore degraded forests,
 1. request the Western Australian State Government to:
 - 1.1 invest in and incentivise plantation timbers (on already cleared land only), farm forestry, tourism, recreation and other alternative industries for the South West as part of a broader plan to transition WA away from native forest logging,
 - 1.2 devise and implement a strategic plan to support South West native forestry workers moving into an expanded plantation timber industry or other alternative local employment in consultation with affected workers and communities,
 - 1.3 invest significantly more in the Indigenous Ranger program to assist the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the Forest Products Commission to care for forests, savannahs and woodlands across the state,
 - 1.4 place High Conservation Value Forests in secure National Parks for the survival of threatened species and the protection of water quality and carbon sinks,
 - 1.5 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.

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Rationale

1. Theology

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 ecosystems, 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 vulnerability of numerous threatened species endemic to the region, 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.

2. Workers and Communities

The SJC also wishes to advocate for the local workers, families and communities who are currently reliant on native forest logging and sees their fair treatment as a related social justice issue. Any move to protect native forests must ensure that workers and local communities connected to the native forestry industry are included in the design and implementation of a fair transition plan.

A transition plan is imperative to ensure that workers and communities have the confidence of secure local employment. Given that the WA State Government was able to implement a partial forestry transition plan in its initial forest protection initiative under the Gallop Government, a second, more comprehensive transition plan could be modelled on the first, learning from its strengths and weaknesses.

Such a plan would need to be phased in over a reasonable time to ensure that forest industry workers, their families and communities are provided with appropriate, accessible and fair alternative employment options (or training if desired), and to allow alternative industries to establish.

3. Alternative Options

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.

4. Nyungar Country

The SJC acknowledges that all South West forest areas are Aboriginal lands of the Nyungar people for which they have cared for and managed 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.

An 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.