Submission to *The Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Reference Committee: Inquiry into the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area*

In response to the Committee's letter of invitation, please accept this submission to the inquiry.

1. **Background:** I was a member of the Independent Verification Group (IVG), chaired by Prof Jonathan West, which was contracted by the Australian Government to undertake analysis and provide advice to the Prime Minister and the Tasmanian Premier, under the direction of the Reference Group of Signatory Representatives (i.e. the stakeholders including industry, unions and environmental NGOs who had signed the Tasmanian Forest Agreement) regarding the Tasmanian forestry industry's timber supply requirements and the conservation values of nominated areas of Tasmania's native forests. I was responsible for the conservation and heritage values verification component of the IVG's work programme. A complete compendium of our reports is available online at this URL: http://www.environment.gov.au/resource/independent-verification-group-report.

2. *The IVG conservation and heritage assessment of Tasmanian public forests was undertaken free of political or stakeholder interference and was conducted to the highest level of professional integrity*

While the IVG reported to the Prime Minister and Tasmanian Premier, we operated independently without political interference from any party. The Reference Group specified the terms of reference for our work and rigorously examined and debated all aspects of the process. Neither environmental NGO or industry stakeholders, however, interfered with our investigations in any way and our assessment was successfully completed in a proper, professional and scientific manner, according to the highest academic standards. We greatly benefited from the cooperation of state and Federal government agencies, including Forestry Tasmania, and therefore had access to all the existing relevant data sets needed to undertake our investigations.

3. *The IVG conservation and heritage assessment was the most scientifically robust and thematically comprehensive ever undertaken in Tasmania*

In collaboration with the other IVG members, I developed a work plan for the conservation and heritage assessment. The terms of reference as refined by the Reference Group specified that we limit our assessment to the 563,683 ha of public forests proposed for protection by the environmental NGOs who were signatories to the Tasmanian Forest Agreement. The work plan was debated by the Reference Group to whom I had to explain and justify various elements that were new or that they were unfamiliar with. The environmental NGOs had as many queries and concerns as the industry stakeholders. The conservation and heritage work plan was peer reviewed and endorsed by two leading world experts. The work plan identified a set of criteria for assessing the conservation and heritage values of the target forests based on Australian government policy, namely: (a) The EPBC Act; (b) commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity including the Aichi Targets; (c) the National Reserve System assessment criteria; (d) The National Biodiversity Strategy; (e) The National Wildlife Corridor Plan; (f) national heritage criteria; and (g) World Heritage criteria. The work plan was implemented by myself, the IVG support staff, and with the input of a team of conservation and heritage experts who I had identified as being outstanding in their respective fields and who were contracted by the IVG to undertake specialized assessments. All reports were reviewed and edited by myself and then consolidated into a summary document (attached).

4. *The World Heritage values of the target forests were comprehensively assessed with respect to criteria vii-x*

Special attention was paid in the work plan to World Heritage criteria *vii-x* for natural areas of outstanding universal value (OUV). We also gave consideration to issues of the protection, management, authenticity and integrity of forest areas as per World Heritage operational guidelines. This attention to World Heritage criteria in our work plan reflected (a) the significance interest the Australian Government has in World Heritage matters and (b) the substantial contribution conservation science makes to documenting OUV for natural areas with respect to criteria (viii)-(x) and matters of integrity and management. Of particular note is the fact that the target forest included 232,286 ha of old growth/ecologically mature temperate native forest - the most threatened forest biome on Earth. The temperate forest zone has only about 3% of the world's remaining primary forest reflecting the extent to which these forest have been cleared and logged. For example, in the Australian state of Victoria, there is < 1.2% of old growth ash forest remaining. Tasmanian old growth forest is therefore of global significance.

5. *The natural World Heritage values of the target forests were comprehensively documented for each forest block (polygon)*

The 563,683 ha of target forests occurred in 270 discrete areas (referred to in our report as "forest polygons") The main conclusions from the Heritage assessment made in respect of these forest polygons included:

(a) Most of the 270 forest polygons were assessed and verified against heritage criteria to be of either National Heritage significance or World Heritage significance.

(b) The assessed natural heritage value and significance of many ENGO-proposed reserves is significantly dependent upon their being integrally related to existing reserves.

(c) The area known as the Tarkine was assessed to be of National Heritage significance and very likely of World Heritage significance. It would add a major new component to the TWWHA, recognizing and protecting the largest area of cool temperate rainforest in the southern hemisphere and was recommended for addition to the TWWHA. The Tarkine cluster was assessed as having very high conservation value and substantial values of World Heritage significance. As with a number of other cluster sites, the existing formal reserves make a major contribution to the overall heritage value and significance of the Tarkine. The Tarkine might best be considered as an extension of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, especially given the likely connectivity between the two.

(d) The global significance of a connected area of tall eucalypt forests, albeit involving some restoration, would add a major new dimension to the TWWHA. On the basis of existing and new information, the tall eucalypt forests satisfy criterion (vii), (ix) and (x), and it is highly likely that these forests also satisfy criterion (viii). On this basis encompassing a functionally integrated 'connectivity corridor' of tall eucalypt forest into the TWWHA would make an outstanding contribution to the values captured and protected in the WHA.

(e) Many of the forest polygons in the North East and East Coast of the state were recognized as being significant for their habitat connectivity and that many existing formal reserves are critically important to that connectivity.

(g) Many of the forest polygons have the potential for cultural heritage values in addition to their natural heritage values, but our study focused primarily on verifying natural heritage values.

(h) Southern Forests (Cockle Creek to Upper Derwent) - a substantial proportion of the forest adjoining and adjacent to the eastern boundary of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) were found to have important conservation values. If added to the adjoining TWWHA

they would make important contributions to its integrity. Much of that value was derived from the area's tall eucalypt forests but a significant number of areas had other important conservation values including karst, caves, Aboriginal sites and glacial features.

(i) West Coast (between TWWHA and the west coast, south of Pieman River) – a cluster of forest polygons in this region were identified as being collectively of World Heritage value and recommended for addition to the TWWHA.

(j) Northern TWWHA (Great Western Tiers, Central Plateau, Mole Creek Karst, Mersey, Cradle Mountain) – Many of the forest polygons adjoining or adjacent to the northern boundary of the TWWHA proved to contain significant conservation values, which made important contributions to its values and/or integrity. In the Central Plateau, some areas were found to be of definite importance for adding to the TWWHA, however more detailed study is required in this area. The forest polygons in the Mole Creek karst region were demonstrably of World Heritage significance.

6. *T*he minor *areas of non-native vegetation found within the target forests were mapped and assessed in terms of their contribution to connectivity, restoration and boundary integrity*

In addition to reviewing the published literature, we also undertook new analyses based on what was an unprecedented comprehensive portfolio of biodiversity and data sets which the IVG was able to compile for the target forests. A clear conclusion we were able to draw from these analyses was that target forests represented the least disturbed areas of forest left in Tasmania. One important new analysis was a detailed analysis of land cover using high resolution satellite imagery for Tasmania with the aim of mapping areas within the target forests that were not native vegetation cover or had been subjected to intensive land use impacts. Our analyses revealed that of the 563,683 ha of target forest some 95% was intact natural forest, and only 28,529ha or 5.1% had been heavily impacted by land use. We noted, however, that their inclusion in a reserve would still be warranted contingent on other factors including their landscape context and their contribution for restoration, connectivity, and boundary integrity.

7. Restoration of selected disturbed intrusions would contribute to CBD Aichi Target 15

We drew attention to the need for and opportunities from restoration of the disturbed intrusions (i.e. logged and converted areas) into otherwise intact primary and globally important tall eucalypt forests recommended for inclusion in the TWWHA. Restoration of these areas would promote connectivity, enhance wilderness quality, and contribute to meeting Aichi Biodiversity Target 15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity Strategic plan 2011-2020: "By 2020, ecosystem resilience and the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks has been enhanced, through conservation and restoration, including restoration of at least 15 per cent of degraded ecosystems, thereby contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation…".

8. The IVG reports were subsequently drawn upon by the Australian Government for their 2013 minor boundary extension proposal which was consistent *with the evidence and conclusions of the IVG*

The IVG were not involved in preparing the Australian Government's 2013 proposal to the World Heritage Committee for a minor boundary extension to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Our findings, however, were drawn upon by the team who drew up the boundary extension particularly with respect to (a) evidence for the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of places against criteria *vii-x* and (b) our recommendations regarding

areas to be included in a World Heritage listing to ensure boundary integrity, ecological connectivity and opportunities for ecological and wilderness restoration. The Australian Government's 2013 proposal was based on a detailed examination of each relevant forest block in terms of OUV and integrity, connectivity and restoration context and in my professional opinion was a first class proposal that is consistent with the evidence and conclusions of the IVG.

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4/3/14