

Chapter 4

Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 The vast majority of submissions, form letters and other emails received by the committee did not support the Government's proposal to excise 74,000 hectares from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

4.2 Like those submitters, the committee is not convinced by the Government's justifications for the proposal it has put to the World Heritage Committee.

4.3 The committee considers the argument that 'degraded' areas, such as previously logged forest and plantations, should be removed from the extended Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area because they detract from the integrity of the property is without merit. Further, the committee considers that the Government, by not providing adequate detail to the World Heritage Committee as to how much of the 74,000 hectares actually fits this description, undermines its own arguments for the delisting.

4.4 Indeed, the evidence received by the committee reveals that only a small proportion of the 74,000 hectares proposed to be removed could actually be described as 'degraded'. This evidence was received not only from forestry experts and interested stakeholders but also from Forestry Tasmania, which advised that around 48 per cent of the 74,000 hectares contains old growth forest. Other expert witnesses told the committee that less than 10 hectares contains plantations and only 10 per cent had been logged in the past. The Department of the Environment told the committee only 4 per cent had been heavily degraded. It can only be concluded that the vast majority of the area proposed for delisting is intact native vegetation and not degraded areas.

4.5 The committee further notes that even though an area may be considered 'degraded', this does not, in itself, automatically justify its exclusion from World Heritage listing. There are many good reasons for the inclusion of these 'degraded' areas in the 2013 extension, including the need for boundary integrity and ecological connectivity, as well as management and rehabilitation considerations. In addition, there is ample evidence that the degraded areas can be rehabilitated. Indeed, the World Heritage Convention recognises, provides for and imposes a duty to rehabilitate World Heritage. There are many overseas examples where degraded World Heritage areas have been rehabilitated. Furthermore, the previous Government recognised the benefits of rehabilitation of areas of plantation with \$1.2 million being provided in 2013 for such work, although not in the areas proposed for excision.

4.6 The committee also considers that the Government's contention that the degraded areas detract from the integrity of the property ignores the World Heritage Committee's 2013 evaluation and its awareness that there were 'degraded' areas in the proposed extension. It further ignores the World Heritage Committee's repeated requests that the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area be extended along its northern and eastern boundaries.

4.7 The committee is concerned that the Government's proposal to the World Heritage Committee is overly weighted towards consideration of the vegetation in the area. There are many other important features, such as outstanding geomorphological features, which contribute significantly to World Heritage values and need to be protected.

4.8 Finally, the committee is disquieted that the proposal could be seen as insulting to the World Heritage Committee, given its approval of the 2013 extension, and its repeated requests to Australia to extend the boundary to include high conservation value forests. The committee recognises that Australia has an international obligation to protect, manage and rehabilitate the extended Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area under the World Heritage Convention. As such, the committee is concerned that the proposal will potentially damage Australia's international reputation and set a terrible precedent for other countries.

4.9 Another argument put forward by the Government for the proposed excision is the objections from adjoining landholders and communities. The committee notes that objections were received and considered by the World Heritage Committee when approving the extension. The Department's evidence also indicated that the number of adjoining landholders who objected to the proposal was actually quite small. In fact, Forestry Tasmania is the adjoining landholder for the majority of the boundary and it agreed to the extension.

4.10 The committee is also not convinced by claims that the process leading up to the 2013 extension was inadequate. The committee considers that the extension in 2013 was the result of an extensive, independent and rigorous process based on sound scientific evidence. This is in stark contrast to the process for the 2014 proposal to excise the area. The Department advised that the latter process involved no consultation or independent expert peer review at all and no field visits were undertaken. Rather, the committee was informed that consultation with the community around the Coalition's election commitment to propose the excision of the area was undertaken by the members of the now Government during the election campaign.

4.11 The only conclusion that can be drawn from this evidence is that this proposal has nothing to do with concerns about the integrity of the World Heritage Area; the real reason behind the proposal is to delist the areas for the purposes of allowing access for forestry activities.

4.12 The Government claims that the proposed excision will deliver economic and social outcomes for Tasmania. The committee recognises the need to support a long term, sustainable forest industry in Tasmania based largely on its plantation resource. However, this should not be at the cost of the integrity of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, or the overturning of the Tasmanian Forest Agreement, or risks to the reputation and competitiveness of the Tasmanian forest industry or Australia's international standing. The committee is further concerned that the Government appears to have failed to consider the impact of the proposed excision on other industries such as tourism. This amounts to a very high price for the implementation of a flawed election promise.

4.13 The committee notes the assertion of anecdotal evidence of the impact of the 2013 extension on the special timbers sector of the forestry industry. The committee notes evidence that some areas that had been set aside for the special timbers industry under Forestry Tasmania's 2010 *Special Timbers Strategy* were included in the 2013 extension. The committee does not consider that these concerns warrant the wholesale removal of 74,000 hectares from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Nevertheless, the committee believes that the needs of the special timbers sector should be considered. The committee suggests that Forestry Tasmania conduct a review of the special timber sector, including an assessment of the special timber supply, utilisation and management issues from forests outside the World Heritage Area. The committee considers that such a review may identify ways to ensure the supply of special timbers without undermining the integrity of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

4.14 The committee is also disappointed that some of the signatories to the Tasmanian Forest Agreement who have expressed concern in the media about the proposed revocation did not give evidence to this inquiry, despite the committee's repeated invitations.

4.15 The committee concludes that the Government's proposal to remove 74,000 hectares from the extended Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area is fundamentally flawed and will have an adverse impact on the values of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. The committee agrees with evidence that the Government's proposal to the World Heritage Committee is misleading and fails to consider boundary integrity, ecological connectivity, potential for rehabilitation, and the many outstanding geomorphological features in the area. The committee therefore recommends that the Government's proposal to the World Heritage Committee be withdrawn.

Recommendation 1

4.16 The committee recommends that the Government's proposal to the World Heritage Committee to remove 74,000 hectares from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area be withdrawn.

4.17 The committee acknowledges the evidence that there are a number of important cultural heritage sites in the proposed excision. The committee notes that the World Heritage Committee has requested that Australia undertake further study and consultation with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community in order to provide more detailed information on the cultural values of the additional areas in the 2013 extension. The committee was deeply disappointed to hear the Department's evidence that this assessment has not yet commenced and that no funding has been provided for it.

4.18 The committee agrees that the Government should not be pursuing this proposed modification prior to undertaking the cultural heritage assessment. The Australian Government undertook to provide this material to the World Heritage Committee by February 2015, and the committee considers that this work should be continued and completed in collaboration with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

Recommendation 2

4.19 The committee recommends that the study of the cultural heritage values of the extended Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area be commenced and completed in collaboration with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and submitted to the World Heritage Committee by February 2015.

**Senator the Hon Lin Thorp
Chair**