

Below is a letter I wrote to NSW minister Bob Debus. It could I think be usefully taken as a submission to your enquiry. The lack of ecological input into the Draft Report by the Commission is evident throughout, as is the lack of any historical perspective and projections of past trends into the future. The whole thrust of the argument is predicated on the idea of short term economic costs and benefits. I have no problem with compensating farmers for conservation measures. Indeed I think the best approach would be extensive tax relief. I do have a problem with accepting ill informed proposals as fact and developing policy accordingly. I would be happy to contribute further to the Commission's consideration of the historical context of what is happening. It is desperately important that land clearing (whether of previously uncleared forest and woodland, or regrowth, or 'thickening', or of individual paddock trees) stop. There is no more time, the game is over. I hope that the Commission will now actively seek inputs from ecologists into this desperately important matter. If you were undergoing brain surgery you wouldn't want a farmer's advice on which bits should be removed, nor would you want an economist performing the operation. Understanding the ecology of this country is a far more difficult exercise than understanding the human brain. Why then would you rely on farmers and economists to make decisions about ecology and the needs of the environment? Reagrds David Horton

Dear Mr Debus

I was horrified to read the report in the Sydney Morning Herald last week on the native vegetation debate. I was particularly disturbed by the view of one farmer that 'the land is infested by "rogue vegetation" ... Because the land is no longer regularly burnt as it was by Aborigines, it has been colonised by tightly packed trees that stop the growth of native grasses ... and erosion is growing'. The clear implication in the report was that such ideas were being taken seriously by the NSW government, and that you had modified your efforts to stop vegetation clearing accordingly.

I have studied the role of Aborigines in the Australian environment for some 30 years. To give you some idea of my credentials I was the author of the massive 'Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia' which won the NSW Premier's Award Book of the Year in 1995. My more recent work was 'The Pure State of Nature' (the title a quote from James Cook when he first observed NSW vegetation in 1770) which looks in detail at Australian prehistory with particular emphasis on Aboriginal interactions with the environment in the past. I have both a PhD and a D.Litt. In addition I have lived on and farmed the land for some 15 years now (and completed an Advanced Diploma in Rural Property Management at the Canberra Institute of Technology).

It is absolutely clear to me that Aboriginal use of fire had little if any effect on the Australian environment in the past and that consequently supposed changes to vegetation since 1788 are neither the result of the lack of fire nor do they give a licence to clear trees. In fact where change can be documented (and it rarely can be) it is probably the result of excessive European use of fire, land clearing, the presence of exotic weed species, and the introduction of both domestic and feral animal species. To suggest that we need more clearing to return the land to what it was is such a reversal of the truth that if it wasn't presented seriously by some people and apparently taken seriously by others it would be the cause of mirth. Similarly the idea that regrowth leads to erosion is a total inversion of reality.

It is desperately important to stop broadscale (and smaller scale) clearing, and try to get some recovery. You can't replace cleared vegetation with tree planting, no matter how well intentioned such programs are. What is lost is lost and gone forever. I am concerned that local communities will approach catchment management based on the mistaken ideas about 'rogue vegetation' (the only rogue vegetation consists of the introduced weed species) and past Aboriginal behaviour.

Dr David Horton, BA, BSc (Hons), MSc, PhD, DLitt

Writer & Consultant,

Works include: 'The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia'; 'The Pure State of Nature'; 'Aboriginal Australia' map; 'Recovering the Tracks'.