

What is Happening to the Tasmanian Forests?

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Australia is a huge exporter of iron, coal, uranium, and farm products. Timber production is also active, and a large amount of woodchips are exported to Japan.

Tasmania, an island state, is located southeast of the Australian continent. Its area is almost the same as that of Hokkaido in Japan.

Tasmania is an island where the old growth and environmentally sensitive forests grow, forming a very unique ecosystem. You can find rare species such as wedge-tailed eagles and swift parrots. The forests, however, are being rapidly destroyed, because Forestry Tasmania (the manager of Tasmania's state forests) and Gunns Ltd. (a huge timber processing company and exporter) are irresponsibly harvesting timber.

In September 2007, delegates from Consumers Union of Japan and anti-globalization organizations visited Tasmania on the invitation of Wilderness Society, an Australian environmental group working on this problem, and had a chance to witness the destruction at some of the old growth forests.

On September 6, we met Bob Brown and Christina Milne, both senators of Australian Congress and members of Tasmanian state assembly. They belong to the Australian Green Party. Bob Brown was a driving force in forming the Australian Greens in 1992, and now serves as its leader.

We heard the history of the ecology movement on this island which started in 1983 with a fight against the construction of a dam. Since then, the movement has developed to cover a wide range of environmental protection issues.

Thanks to their efforts, the mountaineous region in the west was designated as a national park, and a part of the region was registered as a World Natural Heritage. Consequently the forests with old growth of more than 400 years were protected.

However, Forestry Tasmania and Gunns have interpreted the definition of old growth at their convenience. They have been cutting down precious old eucalyptus trees in the mountain foot region, making the excuse that it is not "clear cutting".

They insist that they have protected 40% of the area of the island. But the protected areas are mostly mountain regions or zones with only underbrush or bush growth. They are even deforesting public forests with old growth trees, after which they burn the area to open eucalyptus plantations.

Moreover, they built huge pulp mills in the northern part of the island in order to increase pulp production.

The atmosphere has been polluted by the operation of the factory. Water in the area has been contaminated by the effluents. Local people are also worrying that the factory will ruin the island's marine products, which are reputed for their high quality, and are exported to several countries including Japan.

Most of Gunns' woodchips are purchased by Japanese paper companies as raw materials for paper products including tissue paper and copy paper.

"It is clear that the forest certification system of Australia has caused this problem. Most woodchips are certified to conform with the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) which stipulates criteria for forest protection. AFS was created by the government and lumbering

industry, and is being conveniently operated for the benefit of the industry”, said Sean Cadman, the Wilderness Society’s National Forest Campaign Coordinator.

AFS allows the industry to clear valuable forests including the old growth, burn them out, and kill the scarce plants and animals living there using a biocide. Animals such as Tasmanian devils are affected by the poison and have been found to suffer from cancer.

The members of Wilderness Society finds the certification scheme of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) more acceptable than AFS.

On September 7, Jeff Low, member of the Wilderness Society, took us to see the old growth in the Sticks and the Florentine Valleys. Both are only 90 kilometers away from the capital Hobart.

After driving on forestry roads in his car, we went into the forest on foot where big trees called King Eucalyptus grow. They are more than 400 years old, and over 95 meters high. Their trunks, more than 5 meters in the diameter, are covered with moss, and a lot of big ferns were growing around the roots.

Forestry Tasmania has permitted Gunns to cut these rich and beautiful forests down because they were situated just outside of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage area. In 1999, the Wilderness Society started a campaign to find old and large trees that could qualify the forest as Old Growth, and to protect the forest zone within 100 meters from each of the trees, thus adding these zones to the World Heritage area. Thanks to these efforts, a large area of forest zones were saved from being destroyed.

We left these forests to go to the Upper Florentine Valley, also spreading around the Tasmanian World Heritage area, where many King Eucalyptuses worth being specified as Old Growth are growing. In this rain forest area, there are several unique and precious vernacular plants and animal species. Forestry Tasmania, however, is planning to extend forestry roads so that they can expand the areas where lumbering is permitted.

Local environmental groups are acting against this plan, and giving pressure to UNESCO to designate these areas as parts of the World Heritage Area.

Bob Brown and Christina Milne emphasized that these forests are wonderful resources for tourism, and it would be much more beneficial for people in this island to welcome visitors from all over the world than to cut the forests down. They also pointed out that good quality timber should be used in reasonable quantity for furniture or wooden boats. The climate of this island is relatively mild, and very rich in fruits. Beer, wine and other food products are made locally. They are exported to the Australian mainland

and to many countries over the world.

Tasmanian wilderness is attracting more and more Japanese nature-lovers, but not many of us, Japanese consumers, are aware of all these problems hidden behind the tissue and copy papers we use every day. Protection of these irreplaceable forests is also our responsibility. In response to this, Consumers Union of Japan has started to tackle the corporate social responsibility of Japanese paper companies purchasing Tasmania wood chips.

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