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SATURDAY PAPER



Daily Mail Australia

The Flare of Forestry Tasmania: My Cry From the Heart ...

Words: Will Mooney, Huon Environment Centre. Pictures Matthew Newton*. Report: ABC
22.04.10 6:31 am
57 comments

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The bright-coloured brochures present an enticing image: 'Tasmania's Pristine South', a 'pure' region of crystal clear waters, towering forests, flourishing wildlife and jovial, contented country-folk. It would be a great place to take my mum for the weekend, I thought. She is ill...well let's not beat around the bush, she has terminal lung cancer. She's not well at all. This would probably be her last weekend away, her last holiday. So we checked the weather and rented accommodation near Dover. It was going to be a perfect autumn weekend: 22 Degrees, calm, the best kind of Tasmanian weather.

We arrived by lunchtime on Saturday. At first, it was great: we swam, we walked in the bush, we cooked and talked. My mum watched as her three kids ran around outside. She can't get out of bed much anymore. But by the late afternoon, a frightening spectacle had been unleashed from the forested hills behind Dover. First one, then two, then three vast columns of acrid brown smoke rose from the hinterland, sending thick plumes high into the atmosphere. Then there was another, then so many that the smoke had fused into a hazy mass and we couldn't count them any more. It didn't look like the pictures in the brochures. By evening, an eerie red glow behind the town illuminated a huge scar in the sky.



Picture: Will Mooney





Picture: Will Mooney

Next morning I woke to the smell of smoke. Outside, stifling smog of brown fumes had obscured the whole landscape. To the South, the 'majestic' Adamson's Peak was just a faint pointy outline above a pall of brown. To the East, Bruny Island was invisible, the still sea shaded into an endless mass of dirty grey. It stank. My throat was dry, I was congested. Then I thought about my mum. These days, she struggles to breathe at the best of times. Not surprisingly, she was incensed. She sat there forlornly, looking at the damaged day, at the big smear in the sky. My sister lives in Melbourne, its gets polluted there too sometimes, but never this bad. Never as bad as our autumn weekend in the 'pristine south'.

We didn't want to ruin our holiday, but we were faced with a challenge. What were we going to do? We couldn't just ignore this. It seemed like a viciously careless attack on the whole community had been launched. It seemed unfair that my mum, let alone the rest of the state, had to suffer this hideous pollution. So we spent most of our Sunday scouring the phonebook, calling the relevant authorities and drafting letters to the editor.

I don't think we were alone in this predicament. It is a challenge faced by so many Tasmanians at this time of year: how do you deal with this frightening, ugly assault on the sky, on our air, on our lives, our health, our lungs? What can you do? You've called the complaint lines; you've talked to politicians, written letters to the paper, called talkback. But year after year, the smoke - the choking haze - doesn't subside; in fact it seems to get worse. It's tempting to try and forget, to ignore it, pretend its not happening, to look at the ground, stay inside. Try not to breathe too deep. Sometimes it feels like the only thing you can do. It certainly seems like the approach that many of our community leaders have taken. Like the Asthma Foundation, that advises sufferers to stay inside, lock their doors; be 'alert but not alarmed'. It's a sophisticated take on burying your head in the sand.

Sometimes we all want to bury our heads in the sand. But the annual desecration of our forests and air is so utterly beyond justification, so blatantly and inexcusably wrong, that many Tasmanians find it simply impossible to ignore. As I drove back from Dover that weekend, I saw many people with cameras aloft, photographing the vile red stain across the sky. They weren't taking these snaps to put in their photo albums or show to relatives, they were taking them to capture their emotion and anger, to document their outrage. And they had every reason to.

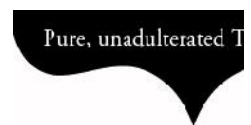
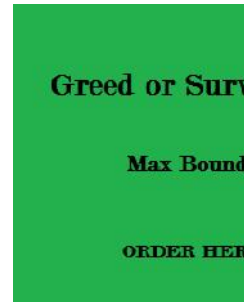
Modern research demonstrates, without any doubt, that the particulates and pollutants that make up this smoke are seriously damaging to human health. These tiny particles travel deep into our lungs and can aggravate lung-related diseases and contribute to numerous health problems. Tasmanian research has even indicated that this wood smoke may be worse for people's health than exhaust smoke. Imagine a dense cloud of exhaust smoke across Tasmania. Would be tolerate that?

In America, reputable medical organizations have complained to congress about the impact of smoke from wood fired power stations, explaining that it can pose 'severe impacts on the health of children, older adults, and people with lung diseases'. According to researchers from the Harvard Medical School, particulate pollution "is the most important contaminant" in our air. "When particle levels go up," they explain, "people die."

Even our Department of Health and Human Services seems alert to the inherent health risks, explaining that the gases produced by these burns include "carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds." The "typical effects" of exposure to these gases, the DHHS explains, include irritation of the eyes, sore throat, runny nose and coughing. Children, the elderly, smokers and people with pre-existing illnesses such as heart or lung conditions (including asthma) are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in these fine particles. The DHHS is, then, fully aware of the dire health implications of these burns, but year after year we are asked to nurse our irritated eyes, congested sinuses and hacking coughs with nowhere to turn.

It is not an exaggeration to state that, during these burns, all Tasmanians are being subjected to a dangerous and reckless health threat that is unleashed with the full knowledge and even backing of our authorities. To me, this represents a fundamental violation of our social contract and a breakdown of fundamental reason. Don't we elect governments and institute laws to prevent this kind of thing, to reign in marauding, self-interested parties who impose their will regardless of the welfare of the wider community?

In 2009 the Forest Practices Authority was trialing new "Smoke Management Guidelines" that entailed "working with representatives of the various land management agencies to reduce the risk of smoke pollution within populated centres through improvements to the planning and conduct of burns." Using high-tech smoke dispersal modelling, weather data and inter-agency coordination, the new "guidelines" (not "rules") would "minimise the risk of high concentrations of smoke within individual air sheds." In simple terms, the idea was to have less smoke.



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I think this weekend demonstrates that the new guidelines, despite the newspeak, have either comprehensively failed or been deliberately hijacked.

Ok, so we don't exist in isolation. What right do I have, you might ask, to complain about my ruined weekend when people out there need jobs. And if burning the wrecked remains of destroyed forests is central to their job, then shouldn't they be allowed to do it? Whether this burning is even necessary is a big, but different, question.

What is certain, however, is that the industry that instigates these burns is only one component of the community in which we all live. The Forestry industry employs approximately 9% of the Huon Valley's workforce. That means more than 90% of the population do not work in the forestry industry. The tourism industry employs more people and generates more than twice the export value of Forestry in the Huon area. It is unreasonable for the Forestry industry to use the mantra of 'jobs' as a justification for imposing its polluting practices upon the vast majority of the population.

They have a responsibility, like all of us, not to impinge unfairly on the welfare of those around them. They also have a responsibility not to undermine the prospects of other industries that rely on the clean air for which the "pristine south" has been made famous.

There is another option: we could all don gasmasks and update the glossy brochures to include pictures of smouldering, blood-red burn-off sunsets and natural smoke infused valleys. The tourists would flock in. We could pursue Forestry's solution to the burn off dilemma and truck the mangled remains of our forests into giant wood fired power stations so we can enjoy the toxic pollution all year round. We could all bury our heads in the sand. It might be easier to breath down there.

Meanwhile in Forestry Tasmania HQ, Melville St, Hobart:

the RACKET

PAIGE LOVES BOOKS

DONALD KNOWLER

TIM SQUIRRELS

Justinian

Gazette

the culture concept







ABC Online:

Smoke has poured from Forestry Tasmania's headquarters in Hobart after a protest by conservationists.

About 12 activists set off smoke flares in the building's atrium to protest against regeneration burns.

The building was evacuated while police and the fire brigade attended.

Sergeant Nigel Ransley says police are reviewing security footage and expect to lay charges.

"Police haven't taken any action yet, apart from attend the scene and review footage and move the people on," he said.

"What will happen is that the footage will be provided to us in electronic form, we'll conduct a review of that footage with a view to charging the offenders responsible."

Large areas around the Huon were blanketed in thick smoke as a result of seven regeneration burns at the weekend.

Activist Jenny Webber says the burns are unnecessary.

"We're calling for an immediate end to Forestry Tasmania's waste disposal burns which are unnecessary and unacceptable," she said.

Read more [HERE](#)

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