

Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs — Thirty-sixth Report — “Review of the Government Response to Report 35: Inquiry into the Sandalwood Industry in Western Australia” — Motion

Resumed from 22 October on the following motion moved by Hon Brian Ellis —

That the report be noted.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am surprised; I did not realise I had participated at the last sitting! I support the proposition that the report be noted. In particular, I want to reiterate to the house, and through the house to the government, that the thing that characterised both the report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs of the thirty-eighth Parliament together with the current report of the committee in this Parliament, was a sense of urgency about dealing with a couple of matters. One of them was about addressing the inadequacy of the penalties available to deal with those involved in illegal dealing with wild sandalwood; the other was, as per our report, about progressing new legislation for a biodiversity act. We are all looking forward to seeing the biodiversity legislation coming forward, hopefully in the new year, because we think that will deal with a range of matters that have been raised in the reports, and we look forward to those being progressed. I do, however, remain a little disappointed that we do not seem to have had a sense of urgency to address this question of penalties. It is more by good luck and circumstance that, for the present, the illegal trafficking activity seems to have had declined. Can I have an extension?

The CHAIR: Member, it is my recollection that you were granted an extension when you spoke last time, so you were actually utilising two minutes of your additional five minutes just now. Unfortunately, the standing orders do not allow me to grant you a further extension of time.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I will take that as a no then, Madam Chair!

Hon Ken Travers: He could always seek leave to have a further extension.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I do not think we need do that.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I feel some sympathy for Hon Simon O'Brien today because my recollection is similar to his: I thought Hon Brian Ellis from our committee had actually received an extension of five minutes in the last debate, and that in fact he carried out the debate on that afternoon. It is my recollection that Hon Simon O'Brien was not here that afternoon! Nonetheless, the record shows something different.

Look, this is an important piece of work and the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, which comprises me, Hon Brian Ellis, Hon Paul Brown, Hon Samantha Rowe and Hon Simon O'Brien, certainly took this issue very seriously. As previous members have said, the issue was first raised in the thirty-eighth Parliament. When it was raised again in the thirty-ninth Parliament, this committee took on the terms of reference and continued the work of the committee that had been previously chaired by Hon Brian Ellis. We inquired into the sandalwood industry in Western Australia, particularly looking at the roles of the Department of Environment Regulation, the Department of Parks and Wildlife, and the Forest Products Commission in the management and commercialisation of sandalwood. We also looked at the issue of how future contracts for the harvesting, marketing and selling of sandalwood can be managed to ensure that all sectors of the industry remain viable and sustainable, and that the returns to the state are maximised. We looked at the management of wild sandalwood, including the monitoring of the resource and regeneration. We looked at the government resources required to effectively detect and prosecute the illegal harvesting and export of sandalwood, including the transport, storage, purchase, possession and identification of the sandalwood resource; we also did a review of all relevant legislation pertaining to the sandalwood industry.

Over the period of time we looked at this issue, we conducted a number of public hearings and heard from a great many people involved in this industry. I think it is fair to say that we put a lot of work into this report and expected a better government response to the report. We talked about the biodiversity conservation act, and mentioned that successive governments have said they would bring forward a biodiversity conservation act; this government made it a commitment at the last election. We have not seen any sign of that legislation at this stage, and it is concerning that nobody has progressed on this.

One of the other major issues we looked at was illegal harvesting and the penalties attached. We had a couple of conversations with the Department of Fisheries—I think Hon Brian Ellis previously alluded to the fact that the way the Department of Fisheries manages its prosecution and enforcement operation or unit should be held in high regard, and that the Department of Environment Regulation, or in this case the Department of Parks and Wildlife, should be encouraged to replicate it. Fisheries does it well; as I have said previously, I spent some time as a principal policy adviser to a previous Minister for Fisheries, and I have experienced firsthand how the department works.

Committee interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

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Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm