



Tasmanian Public & Environmental Health Network (TPEHN)

http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Pollution_Information_Tasmania

Toxic Tasmania or Clean & Green?

Tasmania promotes itself to mainland Australia and the world as 'Clean and Green' but is this a claim that Tasmania can genuinely live up to? Ironically the term was taken from the Tasmanian Greens Party as a socio-economic logo to brand Tasmania as a healthy destination and a producer of quality foods.

The State of Tasmania is a group of islands with a total area of 68,300 sq km lying off south-east Australia with a mean latitude of 42°S. With a cool and temperate climate, prevailing westerly winds, mountains, lakes, beaches, areas of world renowned wilderness, it is home for a human population of around 500,000.

Like other parts of south-east Australia, it is currently experiencing changing weather patterns, with increasing sea temperatures off its eastern coastline and sudden severe rain events resulting in flooding on the back of a prolonged severe drought.

Surprisingly Tasmania has the nation's highest human cancer rates (age standardised, excluding skin cancers), the highest rates of Parkinson's disease and asthma, and among the highest rates of diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in Australia.

Tasmania is recognised as a stronghold for a number of species of native animals that have become extinct on the Australian continent. In recent decades, several new wildlife diseases have been identified in Tasmanian fauna. In 1996 an aggressive transmissible cancer was discovered in the Tasmanian devil. This cancer has caused a >80% decline in the numbers of the island's largest native carnivore. Another generalised skin lymphoma has recently been reported in free-ranging devils. The island's platypus population suffers from an ulcerative skin disease caused by a fungus (mucormycosis). A range of marsupials including bandicoots, wallabies, pademelons and wombats are succumbing to toxoplasmosis (a protozoan infection spread by introduced cats). The frog populations have well established chytrid fungus infections, and other diseases (such as staphylococcal infections in echidnas' feet and tuberculosis in seals) have been reported.

Since the introduction of the *Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement* in 1996 and the expansion of commercial forestry and agricultural activities, human-induced changes to natural habitats have occurred at a faster rate over the last 20 years than have occurred in the previous 100 years (McQuillan et al 2009). Rapid decline of Tasmania's biodiversity is indicated by the 700 species of flora and fauna now listed as threatened under State law.

A snapshot on Toxics in Tasmania

- Toxic pesticides/biocides and other chemicals, fertilisers and heavy metal leachates contaminate water catchments and rivers that provide drinking water. Data on groundwater mapping and water testing is almost non-existent. Astonishingly, only 3 of the 80 or so most toxic chemicals banned overseas are currently not allowed to be used in Tasmania.
[See: <http://ntn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/FINAL-A-list-of-Australias-most-dangerous-pesticides-v2.pdf>]
- Toxic heavy metal contamination due to mining and dumping contaminated waste into landfill; many contaminated sites are now used for residential housing, sports and recreational uses. Persistent heavy metal contamination (mercury, arsenic) from dumped jarosite and mining leachates during the last century still requires public health warnings on the consumption of fish from recreational fishing.
- The pollution from tri-butyl tin and other contaminants from boat slipways are present in many commercial fishing ports around Tasmania. In addition untreated waste is allowed to be deposited into these waters.
- Contamination of soil, air, and water from the long-standing use of various biocides by the forestry and agriculture industries. Since 2001, commercial forestry plantations grown as

monocultures have increased by 40% and now cover nearly 300,000 ha. Biocide residues are now presumed to be present in 40 of Tasmania's 44 major water catchments. Air pollution also results from woodsmoke particulates from high intensity forestry burning (i.e. after commercial clear-fell tree harvesting) and low intensity fuel reduction burns. Authorised burn offs contributes to the existing dioxin levels and overall pollution in Tasmania.

- Antibiotics fed to intensively farmed salmon and trout held in sea-cages have entered the marine ecosystem and are now detectable in wild marine fish.

These areas of concern are diverse yet interconnected. Currently they are not factored into social and environmental planning, including land use. Preventative health strategies need to incorporate a multi-disciplinary approach – *One Health* - and urgent changes are needed in the way all chemicals and toxicants are assessed and managed.

Pollution Information Tasmania (PIT) has begun to document many of these inter-related pollution issues through referenced dedicated webpages and case studies.

[See: http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Pollution_Information_Tasmania]

Government laws – the backdoor to a *Toxic* Tasmania

Since the 1980s, 2 major pulp mill proposals have been supported by successive Governments that have been opposed by Tasmanian communities, supported by internationally acknowledged scientists because of the threats to ecosystem health and biodiversity.

In the most recent pulpmill proposal, the Tasmanian Government bypassed a formal assessment process, fast-tracking legislation to give statutory approval for Gunns Ltd to build a pulpmill in the Tamar valley, northern Tasmania. Gunns withdrew from the independent assessment process when it became public that the Resource Planning and Development Commission's environmental guidelines could not be met. Strong evidence was presented that the current proposed pulp-mill will lead to a range of adverse public and environmental health impacts from air-borne emissions, dioxin-containing effluent released into the ocean and the adverse consequences from monoculture eucalypt plantations being used as feedstock.

'Clean and Green' – reality or rhetoric?

Tasmania's '*clean and green*' island image stands in stark contrast to the reality of a polluted, unhealthy and degraded ecology. The Tasmanian State of Public Health Report 2008 has stated the need for "*a collective approach [to public health] spanning all levels of government and involving non-government organisations, community groups, industry and employers - benefiting the entire population*".

The Tasmanian government must act on its own strong recommendation.

For more information:

McQuillan, PB, Watson, EM, Fitzgerald, NB, Leaman, D and Obendorf, D (2009) The importance of ecological processes for terrestrial biodiversity conservation in Tasmania - a review. *Pacific Conservation Biology* **15**: 171-196.

Tasmanian Public and Environmental Health Network (TPEHN) website – Pollution Information Tasmania
http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Pollution_Information_Tasmania

Poisoned Water Brochure – Prepared by TPEHN for the March 2010 State election
http://tasmaniantimes.com/images/uploads/Poisoned_Water_Brochure_finalX.pdf

Tasmanian Ecotoxicology Research Fund, a public fund set up to undertake research on the health of the environment. <http://www.et.org.au/tasmanian-eco-toxicology-research-fund>



"In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual".
from '*Galileo Galilei*' by Bertolt Brecht