
Australia: Nippon Paper in south eastern Australia

Japan's biggest paper manufacturer, Nippon Paper (NP) is known as an industry leader in environmental reform, but how real is this?

South East Fibre Exports at Eden, about 500 kms south of Sydney, is a NP subsidiary.

It is Australia's oldest chipmill and was the first overseas operation of the former Daishowa Paper Manufacturing Company (taken over by NP a couple of years ago).

After more than 30 years of destructive woodchipping in Australia's south east, forest campaigners were excited by the Nippon takeover. The new owner had, after all, a far better reputation than the old one.

To date, however, Eden has survived every round of environmental reform that the new owner has bowled up.

All the signs are that it will survive the next, and yet Nippon retains its reputation as an environmental leader in the Japanese paper industry. It may be time to re-examine this.

Nippon Paper has an environmental policy that looks good on paper. It is committed to sourcing 100% of its woodchips from either plantations or certified forests by the year 2008. Who could argue with that?

The only trouble is that NP looks like recognising some of the less reputable forms of certification, recognised only by industry.

No Australian native forests have Forest Stewardship Council certification and the conservation movement does not support this.

The certification that most governments and logging companies are seeking is the Australian Forestry Standard, which would mean business as usual for loggers.

Eden chips are poor quality, low grade and sell at a lower price than Tasmanian woodchips. They continue to find a market because of their low price.

They are produced from trees felled solely for woodchips. Over 95% of timber felled in the Eden region ends up as woodchips. These are not a by-product of sawlogging. Indeed, like many chipmills, Eden can only process whole tree logs.

Eden currently exports about 860,000 green tonnes of woodchips per year, most of this to pulp mills of its parent company in Japan.

No state forest for a radius of 250kms around Eden is safe while it continues to operate.

In spite of this, the industry and government maintain that this chipmill uses “heads and butts” and after years of expensive propaganda, many voters, especially city dwellers, are inclined to believe them. They want to believe them. The alternative is too uncomfortable to contemplate.

Nippon Paper recently undertook a program of public cyber-consultation asking people what they thought about its woodchip procurement policy.

Once again, an admirable step, or was it?

My Campaign, Chipstop was formed in 1998 and has made many approaches to Nippon Paper. We have written letters, petitions, emails, and sought meetings. Our letters have been written in Japanese and I have visited Japan, hoping to meet with company representatives.

We once sent a major letter signed by over fifty Australian members of Parliament, national, state and regional conservation groups and prominent individuals. Not one of these communications has ever received a response, so we must ask ourselves how genuine the recent “consultation” exercise has been.

As with many Government and corporate processes, conservation input in this one will probably end up as simply greenwash, helping to legitimise a preordained result by giving the appearance of conservation involvement.

The worst thing about the destruction of South Eastern Australia’s native forests for Nippon Paper is that it is totally unnecessary.

Australia has enough plantation hardwood available from existing plantations to replace all its woodchip exports. Without planting a single new tree, we could stop woodchipping native forests. The factor preventing this is price. Paper makers prefer the better quality plantation fibre, but will buy native forest wood if it’s cheap enough.

State Government forestry agencies supply logs to the woodchippers for very low prices, so native forest logging continues.

Nippon Paper itself owns sizeable plantations in Australia, and is not currently using these, preferring to buy native forest chips instead.

Chipstop works with other campaigners against woodchipping for Nippon Paper and we are aware that there are similar concerns in other countries.

Our campaign efforts will continue to focus on closing the Eden chipmill. We are urging the company to apply its policies in a meaningful way, and only accept reputable forms of certification. We also want it to apply its own environmental standards to its own subsidiaries in other countries and trading partners, particularly in such countries as China and Indonesia.

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