

## Toxic Oz

### Toxic Tasmania

Tasmania promotes itself to mainland Australia and the world as 'clean and green'. but is this a claim that Tasmania can live up to?

The State of Tasmania is a group of islands with a total area of 68,300 sq km lying south of the south-east corner of mainland Australia on a mean latitude of 42 degrees south. It has a cool and temperate climate, prevailing westerly winds, mountains, lakes, beaches, areas of world renowned wilderness, and a population of around 500,000 people. Like other parts of south-east Australia, it is currently experiencing changing weather patterns as a result of climate change, with increasing sea temperatures off its eastern coastline and prolonged periods of rain resulting in flooding on the back of a prolonged severe drought.

You may be surprised to know that Tasmania has the nation's highest 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.

Tasmania is recognised as a stronghold for a number of species of native animals. In the past decades, a number of emerging wildlife diseases have been identified. In 1996 an aggressive transmissible cancer was first identified in Tasmanian devils. This cancer has caused a >80% decline in the numbers of this first-line carnivore.

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 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. Rapid loss of biodiversity means that Tasmania now has approximately 700 species listed as threatened.

Tasmania is also known to have:

- Water catchments and rivers that provide drinking water contaminated from a mixture of toxic pesticides and other chemicals (such as fertilisers) on a background of tannins and organic material already in the water.
- Heavy metal contamination of mining sites and landfill sites, plus many other contaminated sites that continue to be used for housing and recreational areas.
- Rivers and estuaries contaminated from boat slipways and shipping, with untreated contaminated waste being deposited into these waters.
- Contamination of soil, air, and water from long-term pesticide use by the timber and agriculture industries. Monoculture tree plantations have increased by 40% to nearly 300,000 Ha since 2001.
- Antibiotics fed to intensively farmed salmonidae in sea-cages have entered the marine ecosystem and are now detectable in wild marine fish.

These areas are of diverse concern but they are interconnected and are currently not factored into social and environmental planning including, land use.

Preventative health strategies need to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach and we urgently need to change the way chemicals are assessed and managed. Pollution Information Tasmania (PIT) has begun to document information including observational histories relating to pollution issues.

### No pulp mill

Tasmania's government has supported a proposal to build one of the world's largest pulp-mills in the Tamar Valley. The proposers (Gunns) withdrew from an independent assessment process when it became apparent that environmental guidelines could not be met.

The Tasmanian Government subsequently fast-tracked legislation in order to by-pass the Resource Planning and Development Commission assessment process.

There is strong evidence that the proposed pulp-mill will lead to a range of adverse environmental and public health impacts from air-borne emissions, dioxin effluent released into the ocean and the adverse consequences from both native forests (up to 80% in the start-up phase) and monoculture eucalypt plantations being used as feedstock.

It is evident that Tasmania is not the clean and green island that it purports to be and it seems set on a course to become even more polluted and degraded.

The current government must heed the recommendation in the Tasmanian State of Public Health Report 2008 that stated "a collective approach spanning all levels of government and involving non-government organisations, community groups, industry and employers benefited the entire population" is required.

For more information read : [Poisoned Water Brochure](#) and visit [Pollution Information Tasmania](#)

