

Republication: In That Case

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Environment

A state government's forestry department has approved logging of the country's largest River Red Gum forest. Government officials maintained that if logging the wetlands had been prohibited then the physical, social and economic health and well being of local community towns would be placed at risk.

Environmental organizations faced the problem of convincing citizens and the state to change their behaviours in the ways necessary to protect the forest and vulnerable non-human animal species. In its moral evaluation of forest protection a major environmental organization relied on a system of calculation that emphasised economic outcomes and behaviour. The group commissioned an independent economic analysis that showed that logging the wetland forest was economically unjustified. In considering the future trajectory of development, the data showed that the

potential returns from using the forest for tourism activities could stimulate substantial economic returns.

The decision to use economic consequences as the central measure of moral concern, and treat the environment as an economic resource divided the environmental community. A network of critics argued that its defence of the Red Gum forest and its value leaned too heavily on the economics of forests. Economic values should not, they contended, be confused with morality and moral argument; economic values were not sufficient to construct a normative system of ethics. So long as appeals were based on economic values—and the environment was treated as if it were a tradable good—the resulting ethic would be inadequate to guarantee long-term sustainability of non-sentient entities such as wetlands and forests. Indeed, the organization had closed the door on any positive valuation of the environment.

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