

In Praise of Paper and the Trees Felled to Make It

We live and work and play in a physical environment that is actually quite fragile. Recent earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and storms remind us of how puny we are in the face of natural forces. Among living things, we are 'top predator' and our advancing encroachment across the natural world must seem like a tsunami of destruction to other living things: birds, mammals, insects and all manner of crawling things, sea creatures, forests and woodlands.

While we take what we want in the short term, we lay the foundations for biological poverty in the future. The dominance of mono-crops, the destruction of habitats that support multiple forms of life, the erosion of fertile soils – these are consequences of our lack of awareness of how our day to day decisions have many unforeseen outcomes.

Our need for paper is one of many things that we take for granted. It's highly unlikely that we are going to dispense altogether with paper at work or in the home so it's going to do nobody or the environment any good if we beat ourselves up every time we use a sheet of paper. But wouldn't it be good to be aware of the consequences of our paper consumption?

Almost all the paper we use originated from wood fibre sourced from trees. Newspapers, magazines, books, office paper, tissues and – yes – toilet paper.

Forests are incredible.

Just imagine the design brief for a tree - create something that makes oxygen, absorbs carbon, fixes nitrogen, distils water, stores solar energy as fuel, makes complex sugars and food, creates micro climates, changes colours with the season and self replicates. Brilliant!

Now let's chop them down and turn them into dunny paper.



The voracious demand for paper world-wide requires whole forests to be razed, chipped and shipped to the paper mills. We lose the forest. We lose habitat for animals and plants for centuries. If it's virgin timber from rain forests being harvested, then the loss of habitat is particularly serious.

Animals threatened by deforestation in Australia include: Long-footed potoroo, Leadbeater's possum, Tiger quoll, Yellow-bellied glider, Glossy black-cockatoo, Sooty owl, Regent honeyeater, and the Spotted tree frog. Rain forests sustain a bio-diversity that is highly complex and species rich. Its loss means loss of species we haven't even yet identified, let alone many already threatened species.

If, as is usual with forests, the area is clear felled, then the fertile top soil is easily eroded. The whole area may never return to the way it was.

But what about paper coming from sustainable forests, where trees are grown, felled and replanted? That's clearly a step in the right direction. However, planting an area with a single species does not restore the bio-diversity lost with the clearing of the area in the first place. Mono-culture does not sustain bio-diversity.

Which brings us to recycling. We recycle all our paper in the office and in the home. Doesn't that neutralise our impact? It helps, of course, but it all started with virgin fibre from forest trees in the first place. Even if the only paper we use in the office or at home is 100% recycled, the original source will have been virgin fibre. Recycled fibre gradually degrades and will need supplementing with virgin fibre – and that means, more trees! Some estimates suggest that nearly 50% virgin fibre is needed to keep the cycle going. So yes, recycling our paper after use and using only recycled paper helps, but it still doesn't solve the problem of the world's – and Australia's – disappearing rain forests.[2]



What if – from time to time – we paused and remembered that the paper we are about to use originated at some stage from trees. Stop and reflect. Imagine trees or a forest. Beautiful, living, growing trees. Would it be too much to stop for a moment and acknowledge the contribution made by trees?

I remember reading many years ago that, among the first peoples of North America, a ritual of thanksgiving and grief was performed by the whole group every time a tree was felled for

wood. That's the way I would like to go. Every time I unpack a new ream of paper for the printer, pick up a magazine, send paper for recycling – to pause and remember the complex, wonderful life that was given up so that I can benefit from paper.

Sound sentimental? Unreasonable? Perhaps. And yet wouldn't we be the richer if we could get in touch with the benefits we receive from other life forms – even if, only through using our imagination.

My reasoning is this. We owe our very existence to other life forms. Perhaps we would make better co-inhabiters of this planet if we stopped occasionally to acknowledge our debt and our gratitude.

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