

Spend \$65m dam money on restoring forests, rivers and Lake Pedder, writes Christine Milne

(This article is from the April 22 issue of The Mercury Digital Edition.)

WITH the election campaign in full swing, it is time for big ideas and I am putting one on the table — ecosystem restoration. Tasmania is ideally placed to be a world leader. This year the United Nations will launch the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 . The theme of today, Earth Day is “Restore Our Earth” . It is the hot idea in corridors of power and the response to building back better. World leaders are calling on communities to not go back to business as usual but to address global warming and biodiversity collapse with public investment in the environment.

Imagine if Tasmania decided to invest in ecosystem restoration of our forests, rivers and coastlines instead of propping up native forest logging. Imagine if we claimed a spot in the global ecosystem restoration conversation with the restoration of Lake Pedder as our flagship. It would be a wow moment for Tasmanians and our place in the world. With the UN Decade launch coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the inundation of Lake Pedder in 1972, it is time to grab the opportunity.

Instead, the government has set aside \$65m to maintain the deteriorating Scotts Peak Dam and Edgar Dam. Almost 50 years old and at the end of their lives, these dams are listed as the second and third highest risk assets for Hydro Tasmania. Hydro dams do not last forever. Let’s commit to reallocating the \$65m for their maintenance to decommissioning them and restoring Lake Pedder.

Tasmanians should be asked whether we want the increasing liability and cost of ageing infrastructure or whether we want to fix a major mistake. Instead of an expensive and never ending effort to try to maintain old rockwall dams, why not spend \$65m positioning Tasmania as a world leader in ecosystem restoration?

Tasmania has a wealth of renewable energy and there is no risk to energy security from the restoration of Lake Pedder. The 57MW from Lake Pedder can easily be replaced from existing wind and demandside management.

This would not only restore the heart of the Tasmanian World Heritage Wilderness Area, it would restore the natural watercourse and health to the Huon and Serpentine rivers, create more habitat for platypus and rewild the Serpentine Valley wetlands. Restoration creates local jobs and builds community cohesion rather than conflict.

Environmentalism has put Tasmania in the global spotlight before and not only with the flooding of Lake Pedder and Franklin Dam. After the campaign to protect farmlands and forests from the voracious, polluting Wesley Vale pulp mill in the 1980s, it was clear to me Tasmania’s future was in protecting our wilderness, our clean air, clean water and uncontaminated soil. We had what the world was losing and we needed to look after it. “Clean and green” was the big idea of the 1990s. When I stood up in the Tasmanian parliament as a Green and advocated for it, the idea was reviled by many in the old political and business establishment. But it took off when we doubled the Wilderness World Heritage Area and created national parks such as Douglas Apsley and Friendly Beaches. Global markets loved it and almost every sector from tourism to food and beverages benefited. New

Zealand was “pure” and Tasmania was “clean and green” . It was game on.

Declaring the proposed kooparoon naira/Great Western Tiers national park, the first new park in 30 years, strengthens wilderness values and the ecosystem restoration idea. Returning the land to the indigenous community is an important step to reconciliation and social restoration as well as ecosystem restoration. First people are at the heart of this global idea.

On our West Coast, the takayna/Tarkine is National Heritage listed as one of Australia’s richest Aboriginal cultural landscapes. It is one of the largest wilderness areas in Australia and one of the truly wild places left on planet. Protecting this as a national park complements the state’s ambition to be the eco-tourism capital of the world.

Sadly, the connection between authenticity and marketing was never strongly established and Tasmania kept on logging forests and polluting rivers and coastlines while claiming to be clean and green. Over the years the image has tarnished and it is only a matter of time before it is exposed as a fraud. We cannot pretend that there is an environmental ethos in government or business in our state. We are letting down our children and future generations. But we have a big opportunity right now to take a giant leap forward.

We can restore Lake Pedder, we can protect and restore our forests, we can advance marine conservation and new national parks and we can be the envy of the world in the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration but we need to start now. And \$65m is a down payment.

Christine Milne AO is convenor of the Lake Pedder Restoration Inc and a former Greens leader.