

The COLOUR OF karri

by Alethea Mouhtouris

> The karri tree was once used for railway sleepers but now the beautiful timber is being appreciated in a completely new way <

156

> When it opened in 1917, the trans-Australian railway was a momentous achievement, stretching across the Nullarbor and connecting the land between west and east. The railway itself literally rode on the back of a strong and enduring native eucalyptus timber, known as karri, and sourced from the Pemberton sawmill in Western Australia.

Now owned by AusWest Timbers, the sawmill was born in the early 1900s, before World War I, specifically to cut 500,000 sleepers for the projected railway. But with changing demand and economic priorities, the company is looking at more effective ways of using the timber.

AusWest Timbers managing director, Gary Addison, says that the company has invested \$3.5 million in installing kiln-drying and machining facilities to make value-added products such as floorboards, decking and furniture-grade timbers.

'The karri is the third-tallest tree in the world,' Addison says. 'It's a very straight tree and, traditionally, the products milled from karri have been used in structural applications within the building industry, mainly for house-framing purposes. That's changing now because the appearance value of karri, its colour, is now being recognised.' The colour of the timber varies from a soft pink to dark red, and is highly regarded as good flooring material.

'Karri is the main resource that grows around our mill,' Addison says. 'The karri grows so tall and so straight because of the soil and rainfall conditions in the region, and that's why the mill was put there in the first place. The logs are drawn from second-tier, or regrowth, forests. Because the resource is getting scarce and more expensive, it no longer makes economic sense to cut it into green structural applications because those sorts of

Biography

Alethea Mouhtouris has worked for the Fairfax stable of newspapers, and for organisations such as Qantas and

TAFE NSW. She currently writes for the national education newspaper, Campus Review.



applications are increasingly being serviced by the pine industry. More and more, there's a need for us to move into value-added applications where the appearance of the product rather than its strength is recognised.'

Pemberton, once regarded as one of Australia's leading timber towns, is located about 340km south of Perth and inland of the Margaret River region. 'I think it's very interesting the role our business plays in the regional economy,' says Addison. 'Pemberton is a beautiful little town which was initially established around the mill and to service the sawmill, but there are other parts of the economy these days that are quite important.'

The three arms of the local economy are the saw-milling industry, the wine industry and, of course, tourism. 'I think it's interesting the way they all feed off and benefit from each other,' says Addison. 'We run mill tours and a large proportion of tourists who come to our region come to our sawmill and have a look at how it's all done.'

Domestically, the timber is sent to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. It's also exported to the United Kingdom, South Africa and Asia. With the value-added products, the company will increase its export opportunities and look at additional markets such as the United States and Europe.