



Friends of the forest: a Rubicon Forest Protection Group tour group enjoying the greenery on the 10 kilometre return walk to Rubicon Dam.

VOICES FROM THE FOREST

ECOLOGIST AND MEMBER OF THE RUBICON FOREST PROTECTION GROUP ANN JELINEK SHARES HER INSIGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND FORESTS.

Devastation in the Rubicon State Forest: logging area recently burnt, older logged area with wattle regrowth, and log dump.



Few people are aware of the massive scale of year-round logging occurring behind a thin veil of protected forest on the escarpments overlooking the major tourist roads from Toolangi to Marysville, Alexandra and Eildon, only 100 kilometres north east of Melbourne.

Only a few years ago, horse-riding, outdoor education and recreation businesses were extremely popular with local and international visitors; enjoying, exploring and learning about these magnificent forests. Now they cannot even access many of their previously used wilderness routes and camping sites on account of logging operations. Many have disappeared altogether, others are blocked off with locked gates, or have succumbed to dusty gravel roads, log trucks and rampant blackberries. These valuable businesses have had to drastically relocate and change or even cease their operations.

Concerned residents of Murrindindi Shire formed the Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc. (RFPG) in late 2015. Our group promotes the significant biodiversity, scenic, historic and cultural heritage values of our area's forests. We also highlight the exceptional tourism, education and recreation opportunities and their associated economic benefits. There are similar community groups in the Toolangi area, East Gippsland and Strathbogie Ranges.

A key concern of RFPG is the long-term sustainable management of these montane ash forests—mountain ash, alpine ash and shining gum—which are restricted to a small part of Victoria. The future of these precious environments is being rapidly compromised by the ongoing massive scale and intensity of logging of the Central Highlands. Especially when combined with the devastation caused by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire and subsequent salvage logging. This contrasts with the isolated, selective logging that occurred in the area in the past.

In 2016 the RFPG released an analysis of logging intensity, clearly demonstrating the unsustainability of current operations (www.rubiconforest.org/sites/default/files/RFPG_Submission_v5_160525.pdf).

The results were further scrutinised and reported following access to additional freedom of information data showing a doubling of the rate of logging originally determined as sustainable in the Central Forest Management Area, but especially concentrated in Rubicon State Forest ('Panicking over timber jobs is not a sustainable strategy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 2017). VicForests' own analysis also confirms the lack of ash supply once the remaining post 1939 regrowth is logged or subject to future bushfires.

These tall montane ash forests, and associated Antarctic beech rainforests along waterways, are renown for their unique, rich biodiversity. Yet detailed bioregional field assessments of these and other important values have not been carried out prior to the current intensive, large-scale logging. Loss of habitats of varying ages and their connectivity, and changes to plant and animal interrelationships within the forest, including invasive weeds like blackberries, are critical considerations for maintaining forest biodiversity and functioning ecosystems.

Equally, the health and wellbeing of local communities is dependent on the essential environmental services provided by the integrity of these forests; clean air, water quality and quantity, carbon storage and, importantly, a place to enjoy and appreciate nature.

RFPG has recently organised several popular tours of Rubicon State Forest to help our local community connect with its special natural, historic and cultural features. Essentially, we believe that tourism, recreation and a healthy environment are integral to a sustainable future for the Murrindindi community. We want to promote significant features of the area, including the Cerberian Caldera, one of the biggest volcanic eruptions on earth, and the Rubicon Valley Historic Area, now recognised on the Victorian Heritage Register.

In theory, Victoria has effective environmental legislation, strategies and operational codes. However, these are blatantly or deliberately ignored by bureaucracy, even when those responsible are provided with

clearly documented alleged breaches. Nevertheless, RFPG and other local community groups are persistently disregarded by bureaucracy in response to our requests for acceptable environmental protection procedures—detailed field assessments of biodiversity and other important values within a bioregional context, minimising habitat fragmentation, and strict adherence to



Ready to be logged? This 1939 regrowth mountain ash in the Rubicon State Forest is proposed for logging.

PHOTO: ANN JELINEK

The Code of Forest Practice for Timber Production 2014 (The Code), and state and national environmental legislation. Similarly, RFPG's detailed responses to VicForests' Timber Release Plans are not reflected in the final logging plans.

Instead, the survival of critical habitats depends on citizen scientists from Wildlife of The Central Highlands (WOTCH), together with local community groups, who volunteer many days and nights to carefully record on film selected threatened species like the Leadbeater's possum, sooty owl and greater glider. But even their tireless efforts are only protecting small, isolated patches within individual

logging coupes. It is clear that The Code is not being adhered to or rigorously monitored to ensure compliance.

A recent assessment by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council identified the high conservation values of the Central Highlands and East Gippsland forest communities. However the state government's Biodiversity 2037 plan, also recently released, contrasts radically with what is actually happening in these forests. Time is rapidly running out as the extent of native forest clearing greatly exceeds that being revegetated. Moreover, these resulting 'plantations' ultimately form a monoculture. They have no resemblance to the original, weed-free diversity of the montane ash forests, with their complex, dense understory and succession of aging trees throughout the landscape that gradually develop a multitude of habitats for a diversity of plants and animals, sequester large amounts of carbon, and create the world-renown scenic landscapes and vistas.

The 20-year-old Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) for East Gippsland Forest Management Area expired in February 2017, yet was extended by the national and state governments without any community consultation. The Central Highlands Forest Management Area RFA is due for renewal in early 2018. It is essential that extensive community consultation occur and independent scientific expertise be sought well in advance of the expiry dates for the respective RFAs.

This is an urgent call to highlight the immediate, significant threats to our montane ash forests and the need for action now. A general lack of understanding of ecology and short-term vision needs to be addressed, possibly through a series of on-site information workshops involving local community and Aboriginal groups, scientists, politicians, state government representatives and industry stakeholders. Together we need to develop a long-term vision and management to ensure the future of our wonderful montane ash forests. • PW

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