



Victorian forests the battleground in battle to find balance between industry and environment

By Stephanie Anderson

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PHOTO: Ken Deacon says tracks he once rode are now locked away inside logging areas. (ABC News: Stephanie Anderson)

Ken Deacon has run a trail riding business in the Rubicon Valley, north-east of Melbourne, for 30 years.

"That beauty of the Mountain Ash forest and the Alpine Ash forest ... it's just got a beautiful aura about it that just makes you want to keep riding," he said.

But Mr Deacon no longer takes groups riding through the mountains.

"Since industrialised clear-fell logging has been taking place, it's actually devastating areas of the Rubicon State Forest where we used to ride," he said.

Mr Deacon said he used to take groups on rides through 75-year-old forest, with trees towering above.

But that has now given way to cleared landscape and scrubby regrowth.

And the tracks the groups once rode are now locked away inside logging coupes, where safety exclusion zones prevent the public from entering.

"We've just been forced out of the forest," Mr Deacon said.

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PHOTO: Former logging areas scar the landscape in Victoria's Rubicon Valley. (ABC News: Stephanie Anderson)

Forestry frustration common

The Rubicon Forest Protection Group has been fighting against logging in the area, turning to Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) for help.

EJA lawyer Sarah Brugler said Mr Deacon's frustrations were common among community environment groups.

"The community ... they really feel quite strongly about the need to protect those places," she said.

"We've been acting for clients for years who are frustrated, both in the forestry context in relation to how threatened species are being managed, and then also just more generally with other land practices that are going on."

Forest issues appear to be coming to a head in Victoria.

At the same time as environmentalists are arguing for the creation of a new national park, hundreds of jobs are at risk in East Gippsland because of a demand for timber which the state-owned logging company, VicForests, says cannot be met.



PHOTO: The Rubicon Forest Protection Group says the area is unique, and should be preserved. (ABC News: Stephanie Anderson)

Building momentum for change?

Change is in the air at a policy level too.

The Andrews Government appointed a Forest Industry Taskforce to look at sustainability in forestry, although it is running behind schedule.

A review of the legislation protecting threatened species, the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, is also underway.

Ms Brugler said the act had not been significantly changed since it was introduced in 1988.

"It does need to be fundamentally reformed — tweaking around the edges isn't going to be enough," she said.

Ms Brugler said balancing the concerns of industry and environment was complex.

But she said both sides could benefit from more certainty.

"Clear legislative regimes that strike a balance between what we do want to happen and what we want to protect can help try and manage some of those conflicts," Ms Brugler said.

"They've always been there and they're always going to be there.

"I think it's about trying to provide people with some certainty about what can and can't occur."



PHOTO: Balancing the concerns of industry and the environment are difficult, those involved say. (ABC News: Stephanie Anderson)

Rubicon Valley timber plays 'crucial' role in hardwood industry

Responding to the concerns of the Rubicon Forest Protection Group, VicForests said timber from the area was crucial to the industry.

In a statement, spokesman David Walsh said harvesting in the Rubicon area had increased in recent years as the forest reached the right age.

"A reduction in the availability of forest elsewhere has also meant wood from Rubicon has become even more important to the industry," Mr Walsh said.

"At a local level, harvesting can look confronting but more than a third of the forest on each site is retained to protect values like habitat, rainforest, and streams and creeks.

"Striking a balance is an ongoing challenge and we continue to manage harvest levels in line with the forest available."

Mr Walsh said supply levels decreased significantly after the Black Saturday bushfires, and with efforts to protect the endangered Leadbeater's possum.



PHOTO: VicForests says a reduction in the availability of forest elsewhere means wood from Rubicon has become important.
(ABC News: Stephanie Anderson)

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