

Residents of Gippsland scramble for solutions as State Government logs native forests

Soheil Sassani, 12/09/2018, Melbourne, Australia

David Clarke and Gaye Trevan described where they live in Gippsland as a version of paradise. The small town of Noojee sits in a valley where two rivers – the La Trobe and the Loch – meet. Surrounded by native mountain ash, a eucalyptus tree that can reach heights of 460 feet with a life span of up to 500 years, Clarke said Noojee has been targeted by loggers since 2014.

Retired lawyers, Clarke and Trevan are now environmental advocates whose Facebook page Friends of Noojee's Trees provides locals with news concerning their town's native forests. I spoke with them after returning from a recent trip to Gippsland, where I had heard rumblings about logging in the area. The married couple said they love their town's native mountain ash forests. But having witnessed entire regions around Noojee cleared, they feel they have no choice but to advocate for the remaining forests near their town.

In recent decades, records by VicForests – the official government body in charge of the harvest and commercial sale of Victoria's timber – suggest continuous deforestation of Gippsland's landscape. Moreover, recent reports on logging malpractice, as well as questionable trade agreements by the state government have left some wondering whether Victoria's forests are not just in the wrong hands, but in corrupt hands.



The eastern part of Victoria, Australia, known as Gippsland, is an expanse of highly diverse ecosystems. It expands from Melbourne, all the way to the state's border on the South Pacific and covers over 16,000 square miles. Regional Development Victoria further divides Gippsland into six municipalities. Baw Baw Shire – with Noojee at its heart – is located on its western slopes.

Mass logging in Gippsland is not a new phenomenon. Award winning Australian author, Don Watson – who among his many accomplishments has also served as Prime Minister Paul Keating's speechwriter – revisits this history in *The Bush: Travels in the Heart of Australia*. He described early European settlers as afraid of the wilderness they found themselves in. The fear, coupled with a desire to turn the forestland into one suitable for farming, Watson wrote, led these early settlers to clear vast areas of mountain ash forests by burning.

“They [the settlers] bonded through fire, gathered as a community for burns: big burns and smaller cleaning up burns. [...] Burning was a way of life, and also a kind of mania,” wrote Watson.

These actions finally led to the burning of the re-growth – bush that grew back after the land was logged – in 1898. According to Forest Fire Management Victoria, this wildfire burned just over 1,000 square miles of south Gippsland, killed 12 people and destroyed

over 2,000 buildings. “When it was over,” writes Watson, “Gippsland was a blackened waste.”

VicForests’ 2017 “Timber Release Plan” indicates areas logged or about to be logged immediately surrounding Noojee as divided into four main colors: white and brown, declaring the entire south and northeast of Noojee as cleared forests; the remaining hills facing the town from the north-west are either set aside for intensive logging (yellow) or for proposed logging (green).

“Currently, they [VicForests] cannot log because we were successful in obtaining what’s called a Temporary Injunction from our federal court,” said Clarke, who added that without the injunction there wouldn’t be a forest next to Noojee now.

An “Interim Injunction” is a legal document issued by Victoria’s Federal Court to bar something temporarily. The injunction for Noojee’s mountain ash forest was filed against VicForests by Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum – a species predominantly found in Gippsland, which Environmental Victoria’s “Advisory List of Endangered Fauna” describes as facing a high risk of extinction.

The case was taken to Victoria’s Federal Court before Judge Debra Sue Mortimer, who in May 2018, ruled in favor of Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum. The temporary injunction will last until the case’s next hearing on February 25, 2019 and the final ruling.

Regardless of the outcome, Liz Clay, 64, Noojee resident and owner of the Baw Baw Organics farm, described the logged areas south of the La Trobe river as completely devastated.

“I walked in those forests a lot,” said Clay, who for seven years walked in the forestland close to her home. She added that since 2014, all those forests have been erased.

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In August, 2018, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that VicForests had been charged by Victoria’s Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning for logging rainforest buffer zones.

However, Melbourne’s Magistrate’s Court found the charges were not properly filed and dismissed them. Ed Hill, spokesman for the Goongerah Environmental Center lashed out at the Department of Environment, saying, “This was their one chance to restore public confidence in regulation of the logging industry and they have catastrophically blown it.”

Cam Walker, who campaigns for Friends of the Earth, says Gippsland’s environmental community had reason to believe that VicForests in many instances failed to perform pre-logging surveys, which are meant to assess proposed *coupes* – areas designated for logging – for endangered flora and fauna.

These speculations about government malpractice were finally answered in November 2018, when an investigation by ABC led to a national report in which the news organization found evidence that VicForests had been illegally logging and breaching boundaries for years.

Victoria's Environment Department responded to these allegations by stating that the only map used to execute their logging operations was a low-resolution PDF, printed in a government gazette.

In addition to the report, ABC also produced a six-minute video in which they stated that under the 2004 Victorian Sustainable Forests Act, "all timber resources in the State Forest are the property of the Crown [of England]," and only get to be VicForests' when the Agricultural Minister signs off on the allocated coupes.

A month prior to the release of this news, in October of 2018, an "Audit Report" was issued by SAI Global, owned by Baring Private Equity Asia based in Hong Kong.

While SAI Global found five of fourteen logged coupes in Noojee had had boundary incursions, the report's executive summary claimed no major wrongdoing by VicForests, stating, "The audit has determined that your management system is effective in ensuring that the organization can reasonably expect to achieve its defined objectives."

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Even as reports like these found on VicForests' website portray the company as a great contributor to the Australian economy, environmental activist Jake McKenzie is trying to slow logging down with hard data.

McKenzie, a member Wildlife of the Central Highlands (WOTCH), along with other volunteers conducts nocturnal field surveys for endangered species in mountain ash forests. He said, "What we can do is hope to record the [endangered] animals in areas that are scheduled to be logged."

While maps of proposed logging coupes are available on VicForests' website, members of WOTCH work to identify endangered species from the "Advisory List of Endangered Species," provided by the state government. If members find an animal on the list living in areas proposed for logging, they'll be able to change the status of the land to a protected buffer zone.

A short video on the Department of Environment describes the process. In it, a woman claims that when loggers came to her hometown in Gippsland, she was told that the only viable option to stop logging was if she showed proof of threatened species living in the area.

In addition to supplying an online atlas that provides people with known or previously sighted locations of endangered species in Victoria, the state's website also advises the use of an app called VBA Go, which allows for on-the-spot reporting of endangered flora and fauna to environmental authorities.

However, McKenzie said that the government leaves out a number of endangered animals. For example, the current "Advisory List of Threatened Fauna" devised in 2013 does not list Greater Gliders – small possum-like marsupials – as threatened, leaving them extremely vulnerable to logging.

Biolinks Alliance, a network of conservation groups in central Victoria, names two of five Victorian Glider species as threatened, with the rest of the populations in decline due to habitat loss. The Department of Environment and Energy's website lists the Greater Glider as vulnerable without an adopted recovery plan.

Therefore, McKenzie said, "It doesn't matter if we find ten or we find twenty of these [Greater Gliders]."

The Victorian government's partnership does not end with VicForests. The Wood Pulp Agreement of 1996, enacted by the Parliament of Victoria, established a legislative binding agreement between the state of Victoria and Australian Paper. That means the government of Victoria is legally bound to supply Australian Paper with pulpwood – and the paper company, not the government, gets to decide how much it needs.

According to a 2015 transcript released by the Parliament of Victoria, Ben McLean, a development manager at Australian Paper said: "Australian Paper is owned by Nippon Paper Industries. They are the sixth largest paper manufacturer in the world. They purchased Australian Paper in 2009 for \$600 million."

The same report noted that it takes four tons of wood to make one ton of paper. The company produced about 600,000 tons of paper products that year – or 2.4 million trees – half of which, McLean stated with apparent satisfaction, were exported to 68 countries.

McKenzie of WOTCH lamented Nippon Paper's export policy of Australia's native timber. He said small local mills dedicated to sustainable forestry in plantations are often swallowed by Nippon due to the state government's obligation to fulfill the company's high quotas.

"Our government logs our native forests," McKenzie and added that the upshot is that private companies "get our native forests for free."

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Although the partnership between VicForests and the state government is no secret, the ties between business and local officials may be closer than what's publicly trumpeted. Consider the letter on the third page of the company's 2011-2012 report, where the chairman of VicForests, Gordon Davis, praises the "Department of Treasury" and the "Department of Environment" for their efforts to deliver sustainable outcomes. Davis singled out Agriculture and Food Security Minister Peter Walsh and Secretary of Forestry and Fisheries Gary Blackwood "for their ongoing support of VicForests and the timber industry."

David Clarke of Friends of Noojee's Trees says some of this political power is used to silence local fear of logging. In 2017, concerned about plans to further clear Noojee's native forests, a meeting was organized by Noojee Community and Tourism to discuss the issue. However, Clarke said the meeting was hijacked by supporters of the timber industry.

“All these people who I’d never seen in Noojee before, all men, walked up to our meeting and were heckling, yelling abuse and creating an intimidating atmosphere,” said Clarke. Ever since, many locals are afraid to speak up against logging.

Liz Clay, who also attended the meeting, said when she arrived, there were several trucks with logged timber on them parked in front of the meeting hall. She added that she also didn’t recognize any of the men, who she suspects were VicForests loggers coming to the meeting after work.

Recalling the events of the night, Clay said the men crowded around the entrance door and created such tension through their demeanor and words that it made it difficult for the residents to ask questions out of fear their raised hands might be smacked down.

This event became the catalyst for the creation of Friends of Noojee’s Trees.

“I really depend on it,” Clay said of the Facebook page. Still, she doesn’t comment there or speak up. Those in favor of logging are not kind to critics, no matter how legitimate the criticism is.