

## A Turning Point for Rubicon's Fragmented Forests?

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Tall trees, white flowering shrubs and green ferny undergrowth are illuminated in the late afternoon sun. The forest is sweet with eucalyptus perfume and birdsong. I am in a remote corner of the Rubicon State Forest near Snobs Creek, on the slopes of Mt Torbreck, Victoria's second highest mountain, midway between Eildon and Marysville.

My companions are local citizen scientists set on saving this glorious tract of as yet unburned, unlogged forest from the chipping mill. They have come to retrieve infra-red video cameras rigged in trees to record endangered wildlife. Video evidence of Leadbeater's possums, greater gliders, sooty owls, powerful owls or a broad-toothed rat could win a reprieve or partial reprieve from logging for this bit of forest, and force VicForest's harvesting juggernaut to move elsewhere.

We're in a wildlife hotspot. Survivors of nearby clear-fell logging would be amongst the birds and animals living here. Protected Greater Gliders have been filmed – and in sufficient numbers, it seems, to warrant an injunction. Koalas, wallabies, wombats, lyre birds and other iconic species found here have no legal protection, but they too are losing their forest homes bit by bit as logging proceeds.

We are in a coupe called 'Kinabalu', one of twenty logging coupes in this part of the forest. Over the next line of hills, the Rubicon and Royston ranges have been mostly shorn of their forest covering. But this relatively small section of pristine wilderness is now on VicForests' Timber Release Plan for logging in 2121.

The Rubicon State Forest, like all loggable state forests, has been mapped and divided into grids consisting of hundreds of numbered and named logging coupes and protected sites. The word 'coupe' is interesting in the way it subtly replaces the idea of a 'forest', in all its beauty and biodiversity, with the idea of 'timber' as an economic resource. Trees become timber, and the forest a collection of coupes with an estimated dollar value on each. Other coupes here have been given names such 'Dry Cleaner', 'Hill's Hoist', 'Washboard' and 'Laundry'. It's the politics of discourse – the way the naming of things can change perceptions and instill relations of power. The banal naming of an awe-inspiring forest implicitly demeans its worth beyond its immediate commercial value.

Altogether, there are approximately 250 named, as yet unlogged coupes in the Rubicon State Forest, a total of about 1,500 hectares.... How much already gone. (use google earth image pic).

VicForests undertakes to regenerate harvested coupes. The word 'regeneration' has a positive ring, but logged coupes are seeded aerially with single species, mainly ash, and saplings grow packed together as a dried-out, brush-like plantation. The heat of post logging burns kills off much of the fungal and bacterial structure of the fertile soil. Blackberries and other weeds take root along the logging roadways and feral animals get in. The re-growth is more fire-prone than the damp forest it replaces thus adding to the risk of further megafires. 'Kinabalu', with its complex ecosystems

and wondrous diversity of mosses, ferns, shrubs, fungi, birds and animals, once logged, ploughed and burned, will never come back to same.

Not far from where the cameras are located, a massive eucalypt stands in our way. It's at least 60 metres high, with large bumps and burls on its trunk indicating venerable old age. My friends measure the girth at breast height: 6.5 metres. It's probably over 100 years old, but does this mean that it counts as 'old-growth'? Not necessarily. The rules state that the diameter must be at least 2.5 metres to count as 'old growth'. A girth of 6.5 metres computes at just 2.06 in diameter, so no legal protection for this towering giant. (pic).

Experts question the diameter ruling as a criterion for judging the old age of mountain ash on the grounds that so much guesswork is involved: such a diameter may indicate trees well over 100 years old containing many hollows for arboreal wildlife. While VicForests tends to avoid logging any tall old trees these days, if Kinabulu was to be logged, this tree would be allowed to stand as an isolated tree within the coupe. It would be left to stand alone, stripped of the surrounding forest for birds and animals to feed in, unprotected from high winds and vulnerable to post-logging burns, apart from a three metre ring surrounding it cleared of bark and fallen logs and branches.

The Code of Forest Practice states that for a one hectare area to be assessed as 'old growth', there can be no more than 15% of younger (regrowth) trees amongst the old trees and that the old growth trees must make up no less than 10% of the upper stratum trees. So perversely, the fewer old growth trees there are in any one tract of forest, the more likely it is that that bit of forest can be logged.

VicForests carries out a desktop field assessment to estimate the proportion of different tree types in the upper stratum instead of actually recording all the upper canopy trees present in an area. This method has no scientific backing and relies on subjective judgements by VicForests operatives in whose interest it is, obviously, to minimise findings of old growth.

When Dan Andrews made the announcement last year that 90,000 hectares of old growth forest would be protected immediately, conservationists celebrated, However, it later became apparent that a large portion of the 90,000 hectares announced was already protected in buffers and special protection zones and that the rules allowing individual old growth trees in 1939 re-growth forests to be logged remained in place.

In fact since that announcement was made, DELWP's Office of Conservation Regulation has actually tightened the rules defining what is and isn't old growth. Now, old growth trees must be counted within a one-hectare square grid rather within one-hectare circles that could be drawn around a grouping of old growth trees. Many old-growth trees could thus be missed in the count if there are not enough of them fitting neatly into one-hectare squares.

This is one of the ways in which DELWP effectively collaborates with VicForests to minimise the protection of old growth trees.

Only 1%, or 10,000 hectares, of old growth forests that grew in Victoria pre-colonisation now remain. Pre-colonisation, the average age of mountain ash trees was 300 years old. In the Rubicon today, the average age of mountain ash is 40 years old.

Logging in the Rubicon State Forest, in East Gippsland and elsewhere is most intense in forests that have re-grown since 1939. Not yet 'old growth' according to the rules, therefore loggable. But these towering 80-year-old trees (such as seen on the Black Spur on the Marrondah Highway) are the 'old growth' of the future. By now, the 1939 regrowth forests are already significantly fragmented by sustained, industrial-scale logging, failed regeneration, commercial, species-poor regrowth, weeds and fire. In logging what is left of the 1939 ash forests, we end all hope of having a significant old growth estate in the future.

In last year's fires, a million hectares of forest was lost in East Gippsland, much of it old growth and ear-marked for logging. But VicForests have continued their rate of logging despite the disastrous losses and are steadily eating into the remaining unburned forests in East Gippsland, the Rubicon and elsewhere with no regard for recovering wildlife. DELWP's failure to announce any extra protection for old growth forests since the massive losses of 2020-2021 is scandalous.

Ecologists and conservation experts call for the protection of the old growth *estate* as a whole, across all forests. We need a system for preserving forests that have the *potential* to develop the ecological processes and diversity of species characteristic of old growth forests.

But federal and state governments fail to take into account the *cumulative* impact of sustained logging on forest ecosystems. Professor Graeme Samuel, in his recent Report on the Environment Protection and Biodiversity (EPBC) Act, sharply criticized the failure to consider cumulative impact in environmental policies. His report was handed down in October 2020 and released in February and there is yet no indication of when, if at all it will be acted upon. Meanwhile the slash and burn continues.

DWELP's Office of Conservation Regulation routinely brushes aside breach reports by conservationists who draw attention to the long-term cumulative impact of logging on ecological biodiversity. The OCR insists it is responsible only for regulating coupe-level prescriptions of the Code of Forest Practice, rather than landscape level, employing tortuous sophistry in rejecting almost all reports of breaches of the Code submitted by citizen scientists and conservation groups.

Convoluting arguments are also brought to bear in OCR's attempts to minimise the application of the precautionary principle to logging operations. This is despite Justice Mortimer's (May 2020) finding in the federal court [Leadbeaters Possum case](#), that VicForests had failed to apply the precautionary principle to its logging operations (as it is required to do under point 2.2.2.2 of the Code). Justice Mortimer also found that as a consequence, the exemption of VicForests from having to comply with Commonwealth environmental legislation (under the Commonwealth State Regional Forests Agreement) no longer applied. The ground-breaking

implications of her judgement are routinely ignored in the OCR's rejections of current breach reports.

Last month a report was released by 28 scientists who had measured ecosystems around the world that were in a state of near collapse. They identified the mountain ash ecosystem as one of nineteen ecosystems in Australia that are on the brink of collapse. The reasons are obvious – global warming is fueling larger and more frequent fires and the logging industry is intent on harvesting as much as it can while the wood lasts. Those scientists have called for an immediate end to the logging of mountain ash ecosystems, but who, apart from the Greens, is listening?

Will Kinabalu's magnificent forest and big trees be spared through legal or political processes? Do enough people care? There are signs of hope.

Last week the Murrindindi Shire Council voted unanimously to support the protection of Kinabalu and seven other coupes in Snobs Creek for potential future recreational and ecotourism usage. The Council of course do not have any direct say in relation to logging, but their vote is a radical event in a conservative Shire in which the timber industry is a major employer. Vicforests and the Victorian Association of Timber Industries are screaming. Young activists from around Victoria have embarked on a series of blockades. It may be a turning point.

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