

## Detailed critique of:

### ***Coup de Grace: Could the legacy of Australia's worst bushfires on record be the end of native logging?* by Paddy Manning, *The Monthly*, November 2020**

**Note: Comments in response to underlined words, sentences, or paragraphs are footnoted at the bottom of each page**

The Imlay Road twists inland from the southern coast of New South Wales, between Eden and the Victorian border, through a string of state forests: Timbillica, Yambulla, Nungatta. As on many stretches of highway in 2020, the landscape is thoroughly depressing. For more than 50 kilometres, panic growth blurs blackened trunks and limbs as far as the eye can see – a reminder of the flame heights that terrified residents and firefighters through Australia's horrific Black Summer bushfires. To the casual observer, the epicormic shoots are a sign the trees are alive. To the trained eye, the shoots show what stress the trees are under – a silent green shriek. Recovery will be slow, and is far from assured.

On top of the 33 lives lost and the thousands of homes and livestock destroyed, the scale of the natural destruction in last season's megafires was mind-blowing. An area almost the size of England burned in eastern Australia, some 12.6 million hectares, and the total across the continent was many millions more. Three billion animals – including 180 million birds, 143 million mammals, 51 million frogs and billions of reptiles – were caught in the firegrounds and killed or displaced according to a report for the World Wildlife Fund, which described it as one of the worst wildlife disasters in modern history.

In January the federal government convened an expert panel chaired by threatened species commissioner Sally Box. It soon declared the bushfires an "ecological disaster", identifying 119 high-priority animal species in need of urgent management. Scientists say the true impact on biodiversity will take years to understand. Of roughly 1800 threatened species in Australia, one study reckoned 327 plants and animals (including 31 critically endangered species) lost more than 10 per cent of their known distribution, 114 lost half and 49 lost more than 80 per cent.

Describing it as a "season in hell" – the most dramatic loss of habitat since colonisation – the authors noted that "unfortunately, each new fire confers greater importance on the diminishing old-forest habitats that remain". Australia could hardly afford to lose so much habitat: even before the fires, our country was ranked as a world leader in extinction, responsible for a third of all mammals lost in the past 200 years.<sup>1</sup>

Wood worth a fortune went up in smoke, too, in national parks, state forests, and on public and private plantations, posing a fundamental challenge to the forestry industry. In round figures, there are more than 6 million hectares of native forest managed by state agencies and potentially available for logging under the Regional Forest Agreements between the Commonwealth government and NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia,<sup>2</sup> and almost a fifth of that was

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<sup>1</sup> Despite what is implied, forest fires are not generally responsible for permanent habitat loss, given that burnt forests typically regenerate and over time grow back to their pre-fire condition, although there can be exceptions.

<sup>2</sup> The area of State Forest that is actually usable for timber is far lower than 6 million hectares. For example, in Victoria, only about 15% (450,000 hectares) of the 3.2 million hectares of State Forest is actually able to be used for timber production (ie. is legally available, sufficiently productive and accessible) and is being managed on a harvest and regrowth cycle for long term timber supply.

burnt. According to federal government figures, NSW lost 880,000 hectares, or 47 per cent of the native forest managed by the state's Forestry Corporation,<sup>3</sup> along with a quarter of its plantation estate. In the worst-hit area, the South Coast, more than 80 per cent of state forest marked for timber production was fire-affected, much of it heavily. In Victoria, some 878,000 hectares or 29 per cent of state forest was burnt (in East Gippsland the proportion was 58 per cent). In the state's native forests nowadays, says Australian National University forest ecologist, Professor David Lindenmayer, "the worst-kept secret in the industry is that there's no timber left".<sup>4</sup>

South Australian Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young, who grew up on a bush block at Martins Creek, near Orbost in East Gippsland, went back to her parents' place in February. There used to be pockets of lush cool-temperate rainforest in the gullies, where animals would take shelter whenever there was a fire. "Over years of logging, years of climate change, these gullies have started to dry out," she says.<sup>5</sup> "The fire was so intense, it just ripped through those gullies and there were just dead animals and carcasses lying throughout the creeks and the streams. It was just disgusting. Heartbreaking, of course. And Martins Creek ... I grew up playing in this creek. It was pristine."

Hanson-Young, who is chairing a parliamentary inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis, has heard evidence about the impact of the fires from scientists, environmentalists and communities, such as that on South Australia's Kangaroo Island, where two thirds of the landmass was burnt and the koala population halved. The spectacle of army reservists nursing injured wildlife there was one of the enduring images of the fires. After returning last month, she says there are whole areas where nothing has grown back, not even weeds.

Hanson-Young says the bushfires provoked shock, remorse and grief for the environment and loss of wildlife, not just in Australia but around the world. "Since then, COVID has been really interesting because people are actively taking more time to spend outside when they can, take advantage of being out in nature, to reconnect with nature. And I think these two issues colliding the way they have, have really heightened the concern amongst the Australian community."

Straight after the fires, both the NSW Forestry Corporation and VicForests went back into their coupes to salvage burnt or fallen trees.<sup>6</sup> There was a degree of urgency, as fire-affected trees begin to deteriorate within a year, but Lindenmayer says such post-fire logging is the most damaging,

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<sup>3</sup> A greater area of native forest was burnt in NSW national parks and conservation reserves, including 512,000 hectares in the Blue Mountains which is the nation's largest ever recorded fire from a single ignition source.

<sup>4</sup> Professor Lindenmayer and his ecology associates are not forestry resource analysts and so this is just speculation. However, it is a reality that over-zealous government environmental regulations that are disproportionate with the context of timber production as a proportionally minor forest use, are increasingly reducing the available timber resource in Victoria even though about 94% of the forests are not used and so are already formally, informally or incidentally acting as conservation reserves. The Victorian Government's encouragement of this over-regulation is devastating for the timber industry and amounts to an intent to artificially create a resource shortage to force the industry out. See Gary Blackwood, Liberal Opposition spokesperson on forestry, Victorian Parliament Hansard, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Timber harvesting is a proportionally small-scale activity that is scattered in space and time across a huge landscape. In the East Gippsland region (which Senator Hanson-Young is referring to) since the original RFA was signed in the mid-1990s, less than 15% of the forests have been managed for long term timber supply. On this basis, logging cannot be equated with climate change which simultaneously affects the whole landscape.

<sup>6</sup> Post-fire salvage harvesting is standard practice in recognition of the reality that the timber industry has only limited access to suitable forests and thereby has a need to salvage usable timber from designated areas that are severely burnt.

because hollows in damaged trees and logs provide critical habitat for animals trying to survive. Logging big old trees after a fire can make the forests unsuitable for many wildlife species for up to 200 years, he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

The forestry agencies in both states appear to have badly misjudged the public mood, encountering staunch resistance from activists and residents determined to protect what was left – burnt and unburnt alike. In Victoria, protesters shut down logging across seven state forestry coupes, from Mount Cole in the west to Lakes Entrance in the east. “In a climate emergency, we feel it’s time to transition [into plantation logging] and protect what native forests we have left,” said local spokesperson Nic Fox.<sup>8</sup>

In NSW, the state’s Environment Protection Authority (EPA) imposed strict new requirements for post-fire logging, stipulating all giant or hollow-bearing trees must be protected, but reports of breaches quickly emerged.<sup>9</sup> At the Mogo and South Brooman state forests, near Batemans Bay on the South Coast, local citizen scientists recorded well over 100 breaches of the new code of practice, taking legally admissible geotagged photos. Nick Hopkins, who lost his home and workshop when the Currowan megafire tore through Malua Bay on New Year’s Eve, showed me how he used a 4.4-metre pink rope to measure the circumference of stumps and prove breaches. A forest activist since 1982, Hopkins said that he and his colleagues were “shocked by the level of noncompliance in the post-fire logging operations we have audited so far”.<sup>10</sup>

The EPA issued stop-work orders at both South Brooman and Mogo, writing to the Forestry Corporation to warn that “ecologically sustainable forest management, as required under the NSW Forestry Act 2012, is unlikely to be achievable under a business-as-usual approach”.

Further south, stalwart anti-woodchipping campaigner Harriett Swift, convenor of the South East Region Conservation Alliance, launched an online petition to stop logging at Yambulla State Forest, where an ecological report for the EPA warned that a population of yellow-bellied gliders faced extinction. The petition attracted 1266 signatures – two weeks later, Swift was stunned to find all logging on the South Coast halted. “This is wonderful news,” she wrote, “but sadly, it may only be

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<sup>7</sup> As Professor Lindenmayer knows, post-fire salvage harvesting is: 1) limited by time constraints associated with burnt wood degrade; 2) is allowed only in already designated wood production zones; 3) is limited to certain forest types; and 4) is subject to more stringent environmental standards. Accordingly, it is a proportionally small-scale activity and is therefore not significantly damaging at the landscape-scale because the overwhelming majority of burnt forests are not salvage harvested. For example, less than 5% of the Victorian ash-type forests collectively burnt in the 2003, 06-07, and 09 wildfires were salvage harvested (ie. 8,800 hectares out of 189,000 hectares). When extrapolated across the ~3 million hectares of all forest types burnt by these three fires, this equates to just ~0.3% of the burnt area being salvage harvested.

<sup>8</sup> The proposition of transitioning the native forest hardwood sawn timber industry to plantations is impossible in the short-term as we have only a small area of eucalypt plantations being grown for this purpose (most of which is too young for sawing anyway). It will take perhaps 40 – 50 years to establish new eucalypt plantations and allow them to grow large enough for sawing, and this is contingent on acquiring tens of thousands of hectares of suitable farmland.

<sup>9</sup> Industry insiders, if they had been asked, could have pointed to changes to definitions of what constitutes a hollow and a new edict to measure tree diameter at 30 cm above ground level (compared to the traditional 1.3 metre height) that have made it easier for activists to make complaints based on the tape-measure regulatory system that the EPA has suddenly put in place seemingly to make it easier to impose penalties.

<sup>10</sup> Industry insiders, if they had been asked, could have pointed to stumps with numerous flutes being measured by activists at ground level around each flute to falsely increase the diameter and therefore make it easier to make complaints based on the tape-measure regulatory system that the EPA has suddenly put in place.

temporary. The logging industry and the Government are still determined to go ahead with logging Yambulla and the other forests.”

Roughly half of all public native forest logged here is pulpwood, according to figures from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, of which one quarter is used in domestic hardboard or paper production, while the rest is exported as woodchips. The other half of native forest is saw logs, but only half of that is sawn timber and the other half is residual products including woodchips and offcuts, sawdust and shavings, and charcoal or pellets. One way or another, the majority of our native forest harvest is pulped.<sup>11</sup>

Along the Imlay Road, a steady procession of log trucks took salvaged timber from the pine plantations near Bombala to the Eden mill for export – by October some 2 million tonnes of fire-affected softwood had been recovered, representing nearly 50,000 truckloads of logs. The Eden woodchip mill is the oldest in Australia and underpins the native-forest industry in southern NSW and eastern Victoria, and has a controversial history. No one knows it better than Swift, who has been a thorn in the industry’s side for decades. At one stage, a well-lit billboard along the Princes Highway was spray-painted with the words, “HARRIETT SWIFT IS A FILTHY GREENY SLUT”. It stayed up for months.<sup>12</sup>

Last November, Swift served an eviction notice on the Eden mill as a stunt to mark its 50th anniversary. Over that time she tallied some 31 million trees felled and processed into 42 million tonnes of woodchip – all of it exported – emitting hundreds of millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide.<sup>13</sup> Jobs at the Eden mill had dropped from more than 100 to just 30, and local sawmills had been forced to close or survive on government handouts. The native-forest logging industry was increasingly marginal for the Forestry Corporation, with pulp log prices at record lows before last year’s fires. Swift has tracked the poor profitability of the Forestry Corporation’s native-forest logging for years. On top of all other financial assistance provided to the industry, NSW taxpayers have accumulated losses of more than \$51 million on native-forest logging over the past nine years, although in 2018–19, the most recent accounts, the division eked out a \$1.1 million profit.<sup>14</sup>

Australia’s forestry industry was once the domain of blue-chip public companies such as Boral and CSR. Now, it is in the hands of lesser-known private or foreign firms. The company that owns the Eden mill, Allied Natural Wood Exports (ANWE), is controlled by Pentarch, a private Melbourne-based company. Chaired by low-profile businessman Malcolm McComb, Pentarch has a colourful

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<sup>11</sup> It is a reality that the targeted highest value product forms only a minor portion of the total wood volume. This is typical of other commodities as well, eg. beef steak which is dwarfed by the volume of bone, offal, and hide generated by slaughtering of cattle.

<sup>12</sup> Industry insiders say that Ms Swift and her activist associates are no shrinking violets when it comes to personal abuse: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ5fPZP4kA0>

<sup>13</sup> Producing renewable wood products from Australian public native forests does not cause net carbon dioxide emissions because harvested areas are regenerated and the regrowing trees sequester and store carbon. The IPCC has made it clear since its 2007 4<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report that sustainable wood production from a portion of the world’s native forests is an important means of climate change mitigation because wood products store carbon in the community, replacement regrowth sequesters and stores carbon in the forest, and wood reduces demand for alternative materials that don’t store carbon and embody hugely greater CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in their production and manufacture. This is the current situation in Australia.

<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of whether or not this is true, the true measure of the value of the industry is not what is generated by the Forestry Corporation selling logs, but by the downstream value of the products generated from processing those logs.

backstory. Decades ago it was an arms dealer, persuading the ADF to adopt the Steyr rifle, and a hived-off division of the company remains a defence contractor.<sup>15</sup> Pentarch has established itself as a major agriculture and forestry exporter to Asia, with assets in Australia and New Zealand, reporting \$160 million in group revenues last financial year. It has mills at Burnie, Tasmania, and at Eden where it started out exporting low-grade logs from the naval wharf at Twofold Bay. Pentarch's ANWE bought the adjacent Eden woodchip mill in 2015 from the Japanese company Nippon Paper, which took it over at the turn of the century from the original developer, Harris-Daishowa. The purchase price was never disclosed but was believed to be less than \$10 million.

In mid 2016, soon after ANWE had bought the mill, a 17-metre wave smashed the jetty and conveyor during a storm. ANWE recovered, and more than tripled its profits in 2018–19, to \$10.6 million as woodchip exports to China soared. The mill suffered extensive damage once more in January when the Border bushfire, which had forced the dramatic naval evacuation of the Victorian town of Mallacoota, ripped through the plant and lit up the 100,000-tonne woodchip pile. Ablaze for weeks, it shrouded Eden in smoke and threw off dangerous embers, with firefighters pumping seawater onto the pile, and military assistance called in. As he surveyed the fire damage in January, McComb told *The Australian* there would be a short-term glut of burnt wood, and the longer-term future of forestry in the region required a rethink. “This is a watershed event in terms of forest management in Australia,” he said. “It looks like the entire resource has been wiped out.”

Five months later, McComb hosted Prime Minister Scott Morrison at the Eden mill, where Morrison announced some \$50 million in funding for the timber industry, including infrastructure grants of up to \$5 million. October's federal budget lifted post-bushfire forestry industry assistance to \$65 million.

McComb declined to be interviewed for this story, except to make one on-the-record comment: “Put the foresters back in charge of the forests.” To get its message out, Pentarch has set up a charitable organisation, Forest and Wood Communities Australia (FWCA), ostensibly to represent timber workers. FWCA is active on Facebook sharing pro-forestry, pro-gun and pro-Trump memes, but with just over 500 followers, the group looks like an astroturf-marketing operation.<sup>16</sup> McComb is a director but will not speak on its behalf. Curiously, when I mention in passing that the road to the Eden mill looks like something out of *The Lorax* – burnt and clear-felled, pockmarked by blackened stumps<sup>17</sup> – McComb proffers a conspiracy theory about the funding of the Dr. Seuss classic.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Even if this is true (which I don't know if it is or isn't), it is irrelevant to the article, and it seems the only point to mentioning it is to deliberately besmirch Pentarch, which is surely inappropriate for objective journalism.

<sup>16</sup> FWCA has apparently never had any ‘pro-gun or pro-Trump memes’ on its Facebook page, let alone shared them. This can only be viewed as an attempt to besmirch a perceived opponent that is appallingly inappropriate for supposed objective journalism. Similarly, describing the FWCA as an ‘astroturf-marketing organisation’ is another attempt to denigrate a perceived opponent that is made more notable by the absence of any commentary on the activities of environmental activist groups that are threatening the future of commercial forestry. Furthermore, it is a definitely wrong label to apply to a group such as the FWCA which is supported by those who work in the timber industry (ie. actual grassroots participants).

<sup>17</sup> As the article itself mentions earlier, the Eden mill and its surrounds were severely burnt by the 2019-20 bushfires and this would be largely responsible for the look of the forest alongside the road to the mill.

<sup>18</sup> Implying that someone is a ‘conspiracy theorist’ is another way of denigrating a perceived opponent and surely has no place in objective journalism. It is a reality that in the late 1980s, the timber industry in the western USA were concerned that *The Lorax* was an attack on their right to exist, and the National Oak Flooring Manufacturers Association produced a countering book, *The Truax*, which flipped the story to give a forestry perspective.

Harriett Swift says that given the bulk of Pentarch’s woodchip and log exports are sourced from plantations, the firm could be forging the way forward without relying on native-forest logging. “When they first bought the chip mill, all their public statements about what they were planning to do were about plantations,” says Swift. “They just haven’t done it, and it’s such a wasted opportunity.”<sup>19</sup> Answers to questions on notice put on Swift’s behalf by state Greens MP David Shoebridge show that volumes of pulp log to the ANWE mill were down by more than 80 per cent on their annual allocation, and the mill has been having trouble with charcoal in the supply. “Now is a better opportunity than there’ll ever be because, especially with the bushfires, it’s almost their only hope.” Instead, Pentarch is funding a culture war on forestry.<sup>20</sup>

The severity of last summer’s bushfires was unprecedented, but we have seen such devastation before. Victoria’s Black Saturday fires in 2009 tore through 450,000 hectares across the state, killing 173 people and razing 2000 homes. Barely two months later, ANU professor David Lindenmayer was stunned to attend a meeting with high-level VicForests officials proposing a return to business as usual. Sitting in a room with two of his field staff, Lindenmayer told the officials: “This is economic and ecological madness. You’ve lost half your resource, and to think that you’re going to continue to log with the same level of sustained yield is insanity.”<sup>21</sup>

Lindenmayer is pro-forestry, having written a textbook on ecologically sustainable forest management, which remains one of his most oft-cited works. For a long time he was perceived by some conservationists as an ally of the logging industry.<sup>22</sup> But from that day in 2009 onwards, it was clear to Lindenmayer that a cadre of senior “biocrats” (bureaucrats managing a biological resource) was going to run the forest into the ground.<sup>23</sup> He has become increasingly vocal, and is now loathed by industry boosters, who adopt smear tactics, calling him “Linden-liar”, particularly after he led a peer-reviewed paper for Nature Ecology & Evolution that showed logging made last summer’s

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<sup>19</sup> My understanding is that large areas of their plantations were burnt by the 2019-20 bushfires. Perhaps this has increased their reliance on native forest pulp wood.

<sup>20</sup> This comment is almost laughable, given that the so-called ‘culture war on forestry’ has been instigated and sustained by aggressive environmental activism for at least 40 years. Counter-groups such as the FWCA are a response to the continued assault of environmental activism on livelihoods and lifestyles that is largely rooted in the sort of misinformation that is prevalent in this article. Defending a position is very different to aggressively waging a war.

<sup>21</sup> Immediately following the 2009 fires, VicForests was engaged in post-fire salvage of available burnt areas at a rate dictated by contractor capacity and the limited time available before dead timber degrades. Following several years of that, VicForests began a staged reduction of the annual harvest to match the loss of available resource. By late 2016, the statewide sustainable yield of D+ grade ash sawlogs had been cut to 175,000 m<sup>3</sup>/annum from the 2009 figure of 293,000 m<sup>3</sup>/annum largely due to impacts of the Black Saturday fires (see *Fibre and Wood Supply Assessment Report*, VEAC, April 2017). Accordingly, Lindenmayer’s claim of ‘business as usual’ is unfounded and appears to be rooted in unrealistic expectations of an industry volunteering to shut itself down. It seems that this meeting two months after Black Saturday marks the beginning of his personal agenda to close the industry (see also comment 23).

<sup>22</sup> Lindenmayer has never been regarded as ‘pro-forestry’, but prior to 2009 he had been employed by Victorian government agencies and the industry to advise on how commercial forestry could better manage ecological concerns.

<sup>23</sup> A ‘cadre of senior biocrats’ managing commercial forestry could never ‘run the forest into the ground’ simply because the vast majority of forests (over 90% in 2009) was not being used for commercial forestry. However, this sentence effectively confirms that ‘from that day in 2009 onwards’ Lindenmayer has worked towards achieving a personal agenda of ‘saving’ forests from commercial forestry.



bushfires worse.<sup>24</sup> Lindenmayer ignores the abuse.<sup>25</sup> As fewer scientists working for government or universities have the courage to speak up, Lindenmayer accepts he must take a higher profile as an elder of his profession. “I’m not a lobbyist for conservation, I’m not a lobbyist for industry, I am a scientist – we collect the data,”<sup>26</sup> he says. “If I get bashed up by industry, why is that? Because they’re lobbyists on the part of the industry. And they’re actually lobbyists on the part of a small number of people that do really well out of it.”<sup>27</sup>

Maths and science teacher Steve Meacher was just as shocked as Lindenmayer back in 2009. Meacher is president of volunteer group Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum and lives in Toolangi, right next to a state forest that was encircled by bushfires on Black Saturday but miraculously escaped destruction due to wind shifts that day – the area became known as “the hole in the doughnut”. Half

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<sup>24</sup> Only one person has publicly used the term ‘Linden-liar’ and he has been threatened with a defamation action by Lindenmayer’s lawyers. The concerns over the cited paper (a 2-page ‘comment’) in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* are that: 1) neither Lindenmayer nor any of his four co-authors are bushfire scientists; 2) its failure to acknowledge the small proportional extent of timber production; 3) a disingenuous claim about logging debris fuelling future fires even though it is largely removed by burning to facilitate regeneration; 4) claims about natural fire frequency in East Gippsland that are at odds with the reality of the region being one of the three most fire-prone in the world; and 5) a lack of any acknowledgement of the role of timber industry and forestry workforces in wildfire control. On top of this, it received substantial media coverage grossly disproportionate to its significance, including highly exaggerated claims about the role of timber production in supposedly exacerbating bushfires.

<sup>25</sup>In recent times, Professor Lindenmayer has issued legal letters of demand to multiple critics. How can this be construed as ignoring the abuse?

<sup>26</sup>Lindenmayer does far more than just ‘collect the data’. He has become a media performer who probably has logged several hundred credits on (mostly) ABC radio and TV, in Fairfax publications, and op-eds in other publications such as *The Conversation*. His public commentary almost invariably articulates support for conservation outcomes being campaigned for by anti-forestry activism. He has also acted as a key advocate for the environmental activist campaign for a ‘Great Forest National Park’, including fronting public meetings immediately prior to state or federal elections (therefore effectively acting as a political activist), acting as a front-man for fund-raising, and appearing in a cinema advertisement. Many of his scientific papers and their associated media promotion appear to have been orchestrated to match the timing of significant events, for example, claims that logging exacerbates bushfires made at the start of recent state bushfire inquiries. Of particular concern is that this ostensibly scientific promotion has often involved taking the findings of flawed or inconsequential papers and inflating them into sensational anti-logging messages, including articulating opinions about forestry matters on which he has no expertise (ie. transitioning the native hardwood industry to plantations).

Perhaps the best description of the concerns surrounding the scientific research of Lindenmayer and his associates and their behaviour as ‘conservation lobbyists’ is contained in Poynter and Ryan (2018) – *Leadbeater’s possum and Victoria’s Central Highlands’ forests: Flawed science and environmental activism as drivers of forest management change* (in *Australian Forestry*, Vol 81:4, 250-272).

Lindenmayer’s strident denial of being a ‘lobbyist’ sits at odds with his recent paper (Lindenmayer, Thorn and Noss, 2018) – *Countering resistance to protected-area extension* (in *Conservation Biology*. 32:315 – 321, 2018) – which urges ‘conservationists’ to: 1) broaden the campaign for protected area expansion by including economic, health, education, carbon storage and water production values in a business case; and 2) work with the mainstream media and social media to remind people to think about conservation when they vote. Arguably, when scientists advise environmental activists in how to prosecute their campaigns, they become participants in those campaigns.

<sup>27</sup> Many critics of Lindenmayer are also fellow scientists who are not even employed in or by the timber industry. Generally, they are forest scientists who know a good deal about the issues being researched by Lindenmayer and his ecology associates, and are disturbed and often angered by flawed assumptions and misinformation contained either in his scientific papers or, probably more often, by his public media utterances that promote these papers and mostly inflates them into unwarranted anti-forestry messaging.

of the state’s population of the critically endangered Leadbeater’s possum – Victoria’s faunal emblem, which exists nowhere else – was estimated to have perished.<sup>28</sup> VicForests could have suspended its timber supply obligations until the damage could be assessed. Instead, says Meacher, it opted to “go into the green areas, harder”.<sup>29</sup>

It was the beginning of a remarkable series of legal actions that culminated in a historic win in the Federal Court in May.<sup>30</sup> Justice Debra Mortimer found VicForests was in breach of its obligations under the Central Highlands Regional Forest Agreement in 66 coupes, which had either been logged or were about to be logged, but were vital habitat for the Leadbeater’s possum.

The Friends, and local group Wildlife of the Central Highlands (WOTCH), had made use of a regulatory provision requiring VicForests to leave a 200-metre buffer around every proven sighting of a Leadbeater’s possum.<sup>31</sup> Trent Patten, a WOTCH volunteer whose day job was inspecting overhead electrical wires with infra-red goggles to detect overheating, worked out that his gear could also detect small marsupials at a hundred metres.<sup>32</sup>

WOTCH volunteers spent years in the forest, working nights recording sightings under strict conditions: capturing infra-red video of a possum then panning across to a handheld GPS in a single, unedited shot. “It was a job for young knees,” says Meacher, who only went out a few times. He is full of admiration for the WOTCH volunteers, who eventually recorded some 688 sightings – so many, the buffer zones became a serious intrusion on VicForests’ operations.<sup>33</sup> WOTCH proved that VicForests was destroying the habitat of both the Leadbeater’s possum and another threatened species, the greater glider.<sup>34</sup>

Justice Mortimer preferred the ground evidence presented by Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum to the VicForests’ computer modelling, ruling that “the protection and conservation of biodiversity values – in this case relevantly the two listed threatened species in issue – is essentially a practical matter”.

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<sup>28</sup> Who estimated this? But irrespective of that, the possum has bounced back well given the numbers being found in field surveys, including in areas of fire or logging regrowth as young as 8 years

<sup>29</sup> This seems dubious given that the priority focus would have been on salvage harvesting what they could get in a limited timeframe from the burnt areas.

<sup>30</sup> This Federal Court decision has been appealed and will apparently be heard in January 2021.

<sup>31</sup> The 200-metre buffer (ie. timber harvest exclusion zone) regulatory provision was derived from the recommendations of the Leadbeater’s Possum Advisory Group in 2014. It was meant to apply until an upper limit of 200 buffers had been established in the wood production zones. However, this was reached by June 2016, and a review by the Department of Environment Lands Water and Planning decreed that unlimited numbers of these buffers could be created. Given the high numbers of possums being detected, this provision has the potential to eventually shut the timber industry out of the forests originally designated for that purpose, and has therefore encouraged citizen groups such as WOTCH and others to undertake possum surveys. Perversely, this is a case of the industry being effectively destroyed because there are too many, rather than too few, supposedly rare possums.

<sup>32</sup> He may well have, but it is wrong to infer that Patton alone is responsible for developing the improved arboreal mammal survey techniques that were also being simultaneously developed by Victorian Government scientists.

<sup>33</sup> This is incorrect. As of mid-2019, almost 700 new colonies of Leadbeater’s Possum had been detected since 2014. Most of these had been found in surveys conducted by Victorian Government scientists (ie. DELWP and VicForests). A minor number have been detected by citizen science groups, of which WOTCH is just one.

<sup>34</sup> As above, this is incorrect because WOTCH has found only a minor number of verified possum and glider detections. The high numbers of these species found to be living in wood production forests can also be used to argue that VicForests operations do not pose a significant threat to them.



VicForests had plenty of policies in their Code of Practice for Timber Production,<sup>35</sup> but failed to comply with them on the ground during logging operations when it really mattered.<sup>36</sup>

In short, VicForests had not walked the talk. By breaching its own code of practice, VicForests lost the protection afforded by an exemption from the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act under the Regional Forest Agreement. The operations were therefore illegal under federal law, and Mortimer granted a string of injunctions preventing further logging in the relevant coupes.<sup>37</sup>

It was a bombshell ruling – immediately compared to the decision of the High Court in the 1983 Franklin Dam case – with implications for Regional Forest Agreements around the country. VicForests is appealing to the full bench of the Federal Court; a verdict is not expected until next year. Friends of Leadbeater’s Possum, which could face an adverse costs ruling, is crowdfunding for its appeal and Meacher says the response from the public has been overwhelming.

In the wake of the Federal Court ruling the Wesfarmers-owned chains Bunnings and Officeworks declared they would no longer supply timber or paper products sourced from VicForests’ illegal operations. In July, the CFMMEU organised a protest of 20-odd timber workers from the sawmill at Heyfield, parking four log trucks outside Bunnings in Traralgon, Gippsland, accusing the retail giant of corporate bullying. The union’s national secretary, Michael O’Connor, said it was “a scandal that when everyone should be fighting for every job due to the COVID crisis, that Bunnings are threatening those who are trying to defend jobs”.

Forestry has taken a hit from COVID and bushfire, but the industry was already staring at decline. According to a September report by business consultancy IBISWorld, revenue and profits from forestry and logging have fallen by 1 per cent and 7 per cent per annum respectively over the past five years. The sector has a \$4.7 billion turnover and employs some 10,100 people directly, but has shed 4000 jobs over the past decade, and the number of enterprises has more than halved. Corporatised state government forestry agencies are the dominant players, alongside a few big private plantation managers, such as Boston-based Hancock. There has been a long-run shift to plantations: native-forest logging now accounts for roughly 15 per cent of industry revenue.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The Code of Practice is not VicForests’ own Code but a state government instrument developed by another Department which oversees forest management.

<sup>36</sup> This is a gross overstatement because the Federal Court ruling primarily represents a Judge’s adverse interpretation of the degree to which VicForests adheres to a ‘precautionary principle’ clause that has been part of the Code of Practice for at least 13 years. Over this period, VicForests’ planning, protocols and practices have been certified to the world’s largest forest certification scheme, involving regular independent audits which have never raised any serious questions about its adherence to the Code’s ‘precautionary principle’ clause. It is for this reason that the decision was such a ‘bombshell ruling’.

<sup>37</sup> Characterising VicForests’ timber harvesting operations as illegal is misleading because they are legally approved, pre-planned, highly regulated, regenerated after harvest, and occur only in State Forest zones which allow sustainable timber production. This contrasts sharply with the accepted view of illegal logging characterised as secretive felling of trees and extraction of logs from lands where it is not legally permitted; and involves operations that are unapproved, unplanned, unsupervised, non-compliant to environmental regulations, and with no attempt made to regenerate the harvested site.

<sup>38</sup> The long-term shift to plantations is hardly unexpected given the concerted expansion of plantations starting from the mid-1960s in recognition of the reality that native forests would be unable to meet the demand for wood as the Australian population grew.

Ross Hampton, chief executive of the Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA), flatly denies the industry is in structural decline and rejects as a “shibboleth” the idea there can ever be a complete transition out of native forestry to plantation. That would only lead to an increase in imports of appearance-grade hardwoods, he says, from countries with much lower environmental standards than Australia. Consumers will always prefer hardwood floors, doors and staircases, he says. “So the serious question for your readers is: Are we prepared to try and make that work in Australia, in a way that satisfies environmental concerns, or are we not going to do it here, and we’re going to import it?”

Before working in forestry, Hampton was an adviser to federal defence minister Peter Reith, and played a starring role in the Children Overboard affair of 2001.<sup>39</sup>

Hampton talks constantly about high-value applications of native-forest timber – guitars and violins also get a mention – but very rarely about the low-value uses like woodchip. He says appearance-grade sawlogs can’t be produced without also producing woodchips. “The two go together. It’s just the nature of forestry that there is an awful lot of material that comes out of a particular small area that’s used, that isn’t appearance-grade, sawlog quality. So it’s really good that that’s used for other purposes, and this is acknowledged internationally.” It’s an old argument, which conservationists have countered many times, by pointing to the high proportion of native-forest logs going to woodchip – the tail wagging the dog.

“There’s nothing wrong with woodchips, either, by the way,” Hampton adds. “These are plastic-replacing products. This is fibre that is saving the world and saving the world’s oceans, and Australians can be proud of that.”

The industry points to the small proportion of native forest in Australia harvested each year – six trees out of every 10,000 – and Hampton cites studies showing that feral animals, disease and wildfire are greater threats to biodiversity than logging. Environmental scientists disagree, listing habitat loss as number one.<sup>40</sup>

As the fallout spreads from the VicForests case, legal threats to native forestry are multiplying. Last month, the Victorian Supreme Court heard a separate case against VicForests, brought by WOTCH, to stop logging in unburnt habitat of threatened species impacted by last summer’s bushfires. In Tasmania, the Bob Brown Foundation has launched a legal challenge against Sustainable Timber Tasmania and the state and federal governments, arguing that the Regional Forest Agreement is invalid given the documented impacts of logging on threatened species, including the critically endangered swift parrot.

Another action is under way in NSW, based on concern for the fate of the state’s koalas, which lost 30 per cent of their habitat on the state’s Mid North Coast. Midway through the bushfire season, Environment Minister Sussan Ley estimated some 8400 koalas had burned to death. A subsequent state parliamentary inquiry warned this year that koalas were on track to become extinct in NSW by 2050, but a planning policy designed to stop habitat clearing nearly blew up the state Coalition

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<sup>39</sup> This is another irrelevant and cheap attempt to discredit a person’s views by association them with a long past and completely unrelated event that has been popularly portrayed as distasteful.

<sup>40</sup> Logging and regenerating forests is not permanent habitat loss (such as forest clearing for agriculture) which is what is regarded as the greatest threat to biodiversity. In fact, Hampton is correct that the temporary impact of logging, which is also very limited in extent, is completely dwarfed by feral animals, diseases and wildfire which are either impacting everywhere all the time (ferals and disease), or can periodically affect huge areas in a couple of days (severe wildfire).

government in September. A compromise was reached, which did away with contentious maps of koala habitat and allowed private land clearing. Animals for Australia is now building a case, although NSW's Forestry Corporation can't be sued by third parties as VicForests was. Campaigner Sue Arnold says Forestry Corporation is targeting every unburnt area on the North Coast, including koala habitat, and there is no alternative but to take legal action. She is unmoved by state Environment Minister Matt Kean's target of doubling koala numbers by 2050. "That gives the politicians another 30 years to fuck up," she says. "And the extinctions are happening right now."

On the South Coast, the NSW Environment Protection Authority has taken on the Forestry Corporation, and independent state MP Justin Field describes the South Brooman State Forest as "ground zero" for a resurgence of the forestry wars. "Eighty-five per cent of state forests burnt. It's had a huge impact locally, and I think people now recognise that cutting down trees, when so much has already been lost, it doesn't make sense." Field says that a planning approval shouldn't be allowed to go ahead just because it was agreed to before the fires. "The fires have changed things. Forestry Corporation is acting as though nothing has changed."

Field says the native forestry industry was barely making money before the fires, is facing a wood-supply crisis and is almost certainly unprofitable, despite ongoing public subsidies. "It's a loss-making business," he says. "It's costing us, and there's not that many jobs in it either. If we re-imagine the future of these forests, as ecological reserves, as recreational reserves, even some commercial development to take the pressure off commercial development in national parks, that's many more jobs, particularly for regional communities". Field points out that low-cost carbon abatement could be achieved by allowing our state forests to mature. "If you want to hit net zero emissions by 2050 in NSW, and take the pressure off other industry sectors, stopping native-forest logging is one of the best ways to do it." <sup>41</sup>

Conservationists in Western Australia, the only state in which emissions are still rising, are making the same argument ahead of the looming election, calling on the popular premier, Mark McGowan, to protect old-growth forests so as to reduce carbon emissions and build climate resilience. <sup>42</sup>

In Victoria's Central Highlands, economic modelling by David Lindenmayer and a team at ANU suggests that the economic losses from a complete cessation of native-forest logging would be more than offset by value-adding opportunities in tourism, water supply, carbon storage and plantations. <sup>43</sup> He points to the success of forest tourism infrastructure investments such as the

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<sup>41</sup> The notion of closing timber industries as a means of hitting net zero emissions has long been part of eco-activist rhetoric, but is flawed. Wood products are universally regarded as a part of the solution to mitigating climate change because they are renewable, store carbon, and their sustainable production is effectively carbon neutral because regrowth sequesters carbon thereby replacing that removed from the forest in logs or waste. Furthermore, not producing our own hardwood products will lead to increased timber imports from Asia-Pacific rainforests that are less likely to be sustainably managed; and is likely to lead to increased use of non-wood substitute materials (steel, concrete, aluminium) that embody much greater carbon emissions in the production and manufacture.

<sup>42</sup> There has been no logging of old growth forests in WA since 2001, but 'conservationists' seem to erroneously regard any mature forest as 'old growth'.

<sup>43</sup> This modelling (referred to as 'ecosystem accounting') has been found to be highly flawed by the Institute of Foresters of Australia. Their critique noted nine specific areas of concern and concluded that "*that the estimates of many of the values are so imprecise or biased as to be unusable for policy decisions*". More detail is contained in Poynter and Ryan (2018) – *Leadbeater's possum and Victoria's Central Highlands' forests: Flawed science and environmental activism as drivers of forest management change* (in *Australian Forestry*, Vol 81:4, 250-272).

Otway Fly in the state's west and the Tahune Airwalk in Tasmania. Highly skilled loggers would find like-for-like jobs in timber plantations, or could be deployed as elite firefighters and in managing forests for carbon sequestration.<sup>44</sup> It is a model Lindenmayer believes could be applied Australia wide – and is in fact closely aligned with the experience of New Zealand, which phased out native-forest logging long ago.<sup>45</sup>

Last December, Victoria's Andrews government did announce a \$120 million package including a transition away from native-forest logging by 2030, but this was immediately criticised on all sides of the forests debate, including by conservationists who say a decade's worth of commercial timber simply is not there and the exit will have to come much sooner. It is just the latest in a series of restructuring packages, and will not be the last.

Greg L'Estrange is a 40-year veteran of the forestry industry in Australia, whose career culminated in a tumultuous stint as chief executive of stricken Tasmanian woodchip exporter Gunns Ltd. In 2010, L'Estrange pulled Gunns out of native forests to transition to a plantation-based business, declaring that "the conflict largely has to end". He added that both Gunns' employees and the communities it operated in had been collateral damage. The Gunns move ushered in peace talks with the industry, unions and conservationists, which resulted in the 2012 Tasmanian Forest Agreement.<sup>46</sup>

Gunns' controversial Bell Bay Pulp Mill proposal was stalled, and 500,000 hectares of forest were saved from logging under a deal that stuck until the Hodgman government dismantled it three years later.<sup>47</sup> L'Estrange blames the extremes of either end of the forest debate for the failure of the Tasmanian Forest Agreement, arguing that both preferred to make political mileage out of ongoing conflict – pitting city versus country; greens versus industry – rather than settle for a negotiated, constructive outcome.<sup>48</sup> In the wake of the devastating bushfires and the continued conflict around native-forest harvesting, L'Estrange thinks there could once again be a similar roundtable process of negotiation and compromise, perhaps on a national basis.<sup>49</sup> "We do not have a transition pathway

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<sup>44</sup> The plantation industry already employs a workforce, so displaced native forest industry personnel could not simply find 'like-for-like' work unless the plantation industry expanded – which would involve extensive new plantings and decades before they became harvestable. This is an example of the misinformation often spread.

<sup>45</sup> The NZ native forest industry was relatively small and closed in 2002 when there was a much larger softwood plantation resource, so it is a dubious comparison to the Australian situation.

<sup>46</sup> Gunns was a large company that operated both in native forests and plantations around Australia, so it could afford to get out of native forests and continue to operate. Very few other businesses in the native forest sector are like this, and so would be forced to close down. Understandably, these businesses didn't have much enthusiasm for the direction that Gunns was trying to take them and most were strongly opposed to the Tasmanian forest peace deal process instigated by L'Estrange on behalf of Gunns.

<sup>47</sup> The proposed Gunns pulp mill was going to use a plantation-grown wood resource. So, 'stalling' the mill did not save 500,000 hectares from logging.

<sup>48</sup> Why would the timber industry want ongoing conflict? They simply fought for their survival against an opponent that uses conflict to gain political leverage. It is simply wrong to say that the industry is a willing and enthusiastic participant in the conflict, as distinct from one that is forced to defend itself.

<sup>49</sup> Tasmania had a unique situation in that the major part of the local industry occupied by Gunns (by far the largest company) had a proposed (but strongly opposed) pulp mill on the table that could be used as a bargaining chip. Forcing environmental activist negotiators to drop their opposition to the building of the pulpmill could ensure that the industry could at least gain something for agreeing to downsize or close by allowing its native forest resource to be transferred to national parks and conservation reserves. This allowed a real deal to be done

to plantations,” he says. “We’ve got to have a conversation, and get the right outcomes.” Victoria, with the largest estate at some 500,000 hectares, should be “the heartland of the plantation industry in Australia ... it appears to be pilfering that opportunity at the moment”. Done right, L’Estrange believes it could be possible to protect both the endangered species and the endangered timber-dependent communities, by shifting to higher-valued timber products.<sup>50</sup>

Australia could reduce imports of rainforest timbers from South-East Asia, used in most decking applications, and stop the annual export of 15 million tonnes of woodchip to Asia to be sold back here as toilet paper and other tissue products. “That’s nuts,” says L’Estrange.

L’Estrange still holds a candle for a new Australian pulp mill, most likely in Victoria, which would be 100 per cent plantation based, dioxin free, use green energy and water recycling, and generate hundreds of jobs. The logical place for such a facility would be Portland, reducing that region’s reliance on the high-cost Alcoa Aluminium Smelter, which is dependent on state-subsidised electricity. In the recovery from the pandemic, when supply chains have been stretched – and following bizarre panic-buying of toilet paper – there is an economic sovereignty argument to make. “Do you think it’s satisfactory to pin a \$100 note to a tree and send it to China for processing?” asks L’Estrange. “Why wouldn’t you want to explore how possible [an Australian pulp mill] is?” He is critical of the Andrews government’s plan to phase out native-forest logging, saying it was handed to industry as “a fait accompli”.

For his part, the AFPA’s Ross Hampton agrees, suggesting a negotiated process could work in Victoria. “I’m deeply disappointed that the Andrews government chose to not think about doing something like that,” he says. “Perhaps it’s not even too late.”<sup>51</sup> On the other side of the fence, the Bob Brown Foundation, which has launched a campaign generating thousands of emails to politicians calling for an end to native-forest logging, does not support the idea of a Tasmanian Forest Agreement–style process at state or federal level. Campaign manager Jenny Weber says the agreement was a lost opportunity to transition out of native-forest logging when the industry was on its knees, and weakened the environment movement because supposedly protected areas were later opened up.<sup>52</sup> Australia “absolutely doesn’t” need a repeat of that experience, she says. “It just needs a transition out of native forests, and the government can do that. We’ve seen so many

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that benefitted both parties. However, the native forest sector elsewhere doesn’t have such a bargaining chip and would just be forced to close down, which is not really a true deal.

<sup>50</sup> Done right, a transition from native forests to plantations without damaging timber-dependent communities would take perhaps 40 -50 years for expanded plantations to grow to harvestable size and for appropriate processing infrastructure to develop. However, the Victorian Government is trying to force such a transition in just 10 years (by 2030), which is just a complete farce.

<sup>51</sup> In fact, this has already been tried. In 2015, Victoria’s Andrews Government established a Forest Industry Taskforce comprised of industry and environmental group representatives which ran for several years with the aim of determining the future of state’s native hardwood industry. According to some industry participants, it seemed to be aimed at convincing them to close down and accept compensation, and so understandably it went nowhere.

<sup>52</sup> It is interesting that Jenny Weber now describes the Tasmanian Forest Agreement process as a lost opportunity. While the negotiations were taking place, she was the convenor of a group called ‘Still Wild Still Threatened’ which strongly opposed the agreement because it allowed continuation of a smaller native forest industry and required environmental activists to support the building of Gunns’ proposed (but hated) Tamar Valley pulp mill in return for 500,000 hectares of new national parks of the environmentalists’ choosing. Ultimately, 400,000 hectares of these proposed reserves were never legally ratified because the Tasmanian Labor Government was voted out. So, they were never actually reserves which she seems to be implying.



companies through the pandemic who have had people lose jobs without processes between the greenies and industry to work out a way forward.”

The Regional Forest Agreements in Victoria, NSW, Western Australia and Tasmania all rolled over in the past three years. Struck in the late 1990s as 20-year deals, they were meant to provide resource security and exempt forestry operations from national environment laws.

Economically, the agreements have been a losing proposition for taxpayers. State forestry agencies, entrusted with the multiple-use public forests, have continued to eke out marginal profits or to lose money.<sup>53</sup> Economist and retired accountant John Lawrence estimates that Forestry Tasmania (now renamed Sustainable Timber Tasmania) lost \$1.3 billion over the 20 years of the state’s Regional Forest Agreement in what he called a “giant fraud” on taxpayers. Those losses come on top of \$276 million in exit and transitional payments from the taxpayer as part of the Tasmanian Forest Agreement process in 2011. In a fiery April speech, former Greens leader Christine Milne, a director of the Bob Brown Foundation, said the restructure package was heavily rorted, warning that “the logging industry has been paid to get out of native-forest logging, paid to go back into native-forest logging, and paid to leave again. They are on the cusp of being subsidised to go back in again.”<sup>54</sup>

The picture is not dissimilar in Victoria. Steve Meacher keeps a spreadsheet of VicForests’ accounts, which shows the organisation has burned taxpayer money over the 15 financial years since it was established, failing to pay a dividend in most years and with accumulated pre-tax profits of \$38 million only made possible by \$57 million in grants.<sup>55</sup> Last year, for example, VicForests reported a pre-tax profit of \$4 million, but would’ve made a loss of \$7 million if it weren’t for the payments of \$11 million it received not to log habitat of Leadbeater’s possum.<sup>56</sup> On top of that, the industry has been showered with nearly half a billion dollars in restructure funding, including \$200 million to Australian Paper in Maryvale, a \$110 million investment in new plantations, and another \$60 million

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<sup>53</sup> To clarify, State forestry agencies are not ‘entrusted with the multiple-use forests’. Instead, they operate within part of the multiple-use forest estate that is suitable and economically accessible, and is not subject to some regulatory environmental protection provision, such as a wildlife or stream buffer or Special Protection Zone. In Victoria, after all these things are taken account of, VicForests has access to only about 15% of the State’s multiple-use forests, and they only manage these accessible areas for the several years that it takes for each coupe to be harvested and successfully regenerated. As such they are constrained in their ability to maximise profits and arguably should never have been forced to be judged in this way, as distinct from the past when revenue from log sales went into consolidated revenue with the agencies essentially providing a public service by managing and supplying a resource to an industry that accrues most of the socio-economic benefit of wealth generation and employment in the downstream processing of that resource.

<sup>54</sup> The bottom line on this that the remaining native forest sector in Tasmania is a probably less than half of what it was in 2010 prior to the Tasmanian Forest Agreement process.

<sup>55</sup> This is demonstrably false. In his 2013 report: *Managing Victoria’s Native Forest Timber Resources*, Victoria’s Auditor General noted that the Victorian Government pays no subsidies to VicForests, although it does loan the agency funds (which have to be repaid with interest) to deal with an uneven revenue stream caused by bushfires that prevent its contractors from working for considerable periods and slow payments by sawmilling companies. As far as we are aware this arrangement has not changed since then.

<sup>56</sup> This is a nonsense argument because if VicForests hadn’t been compensated ‘to not log habitat of Leadbeater’s Possum’ (remember these are designated wood production zones that were previously allowed to be harvested sometimes up to days before they were suddenly withdrawn), they would presumably have harvested these areas and made the same amount of money. Further to this, the profit of VicForests would potentially be several million dollars per year greater over the past 5 – 10 years if not for having to defend itself against incessant legal challenges (often frivolous) mounted by a variety of groups including Mr Meacher’s. Indeed VicForests is still owed \$1.2 million in legal costs by the group My Environment, which lost its case in about 2013.

to part-purchase the Heyfield mill in 2017.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, VicForests’ estate is valued at a pitiable \$43 million – a cup of coffee for every Victorian, says Lindenmayer.<sup>58</sup>

In NSW, a proposal to sell off the Forestry Corporation altogether was shelved earlier in the wake of the bushfires, but Treasury is understood to be looking closely at ways to turn the marginal operation around. The situation in WA is no better.

Environmentally, too, the Regional Forest Agreements have failed. An October report, produced for the Places You Love alliance of 60 environment groups, found the agreements effectively established a system of self-regulation that had not protected forest-dependent threatened species – a “salutary warning” of the risks of devolving national responsibilities to state governments.<sup>59</sup> The report will feed into a review of the Environment, Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act by former competition tsar Graeme Samuel, due for release imminently. The interim report recommended the creation of new national environment standards enforced by an independent environmental watchdog – a tough cop on the beat.

Federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley’s Streamlining Environmental Approvals bill, which passed the lower house in September, was drafted before the interim report was even received. Ley summarily dismissed the idea of a new regulator, and the government, from the prime minister down, declares ad nauseam that slashing “red and green tape” is key to the recovery from the COVID recession.

Ley insists there will be no diminution of environment protections, and in October held off from introducing her bill to the Senate pending receipt of the final report. The political debate, when it comes, will be bruising. Sarah Hanson-Young, as the Greens’ environment spokesperson, says the Morrison government cannot be trusted and her party is fundamentally opposed to devolving environmental approvals to the states: “It shouldn’t just be up to Queensland as to what happens with the Great Barrier Reef. And it shouldn’t just be up to New South Wales what happens to the Darling, as part of the Murray–Darling – in fact, we know what the result of that is, it’s a dying river system. It shouldn’t just be up to the Tasmanian government to decide whether to dam a river or not. If it was, we would’ve lost the Franklin.”

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<sup>57</sup> The environmentalist rhetoric has for many years misrepresented payments for broader industry change (including industry exit recompense) as subsidies that supposedly enable the native forest sector, including VicForests, to continue to operate. The money to Australian Paper is to assist it in developing a waste recycling stream, while the plantations money is to develop a new industry. The investment in the ASH Heyfield mill could be seen as a benefit to the native forest sector, but I believe it has now been repaid because the State Government’s part-ownership has been sold to another entity.

<sup>58</sup> I would agree that \$43 million seems low, but that is only the current standing value of the logs. The true value of the 6% portion of Victorian forest that VicForests has access to would be the downstream value of the wood products obtained by processing these logs and the associated socio-economic value that it generates. Unfortunately, the environmental rhetoric continues to misrepresent the value of the native forest industry sector as being akin only to the revenue generated by VicForests when selling logs to the industry.

<sup>59</sup> It is impossible to produce wood products without causing environmental impacts, and the purpose of the Regional Forest Agreements was to strike an appropriate balance that allowed wood production while minimising environmental impacts. This balance takes account of the reality that most of the forests not used for wood production and are therefore already acting as conservation reserves. This lessens the imperative to preserve every animal in every logging operation, but this seems to be lost on environmental activists who are assessing the RFA’s as though they can achieve the impossible, ie. wood can be produced without causing any impacts. It is a reality that timber production is not a significant threat to any threatened wildlife species because it is so limited in extent within the range of such species.

Lyndon Schneiders, consultant to the Places You Love alliance and architect of its environmental law campaign, describes Ley as the most effective environment minister since the Coalition was elected in 2013, who has consulted eminent environmental scientists and lawyers, and appointed a hard-hitting, independent former regulator to conduct the EPBC Act review. Schneiders is remaining constructively engaged. “I could sit here and say to you, this is all a disaster, and we should just be brainlessly opposing it, and keep in place a broken and corrupt system,” says Schneiders. “I could say that to you, but I’m not going to, because I’ve been around long enough to know that change is badly needed [and] playing parlour games around politics, I’ve found over 25 years, ain’t getting us nowhere, and in fact things continue to go backwards.”

But a “let ‘er rip” deregulatory agenda, if it is pursued in native forests by the Morrison government, is guaranteed to stir up passions in the fire-affected communities.<sup>60</sup>

From the environment movement has come a new determination to end native-forest logging altogether. But the forestry industry has bipartisan support, and the Greens were on their own in August when they introduced a Senate motion calling on the federal government to immediately protect all high-conservation value forests in the wake of the VicForests case.

Some in the Coalition believe they can make mileage out of a culture war on forests, which pitches to blue-collar workers in timber communities.<sup>61</sup> The federal assistant minister for forestry is Jonathon Duniam, an ex-staffer of arch conservative Tasmanian senator Eric Abetz. Duniam recently claimed in the Senate that the environmental movement would not stop “until the last chainsaw falls silent”. Today it was native-forest harvesting, he warned, but tomorrow it would be plantations. Not one Greens politician or conservationist I have spoken with has called for an end to plantation forestry.<sup>62</sup>

After the devastating bushfires of 2019–20, the native forest that remains is more ecologically important than before – wherever it is, and whoever owns it. So in the NSW South Coast hamlet of Manyana, a small patch of 20 hectares of privately owned bushland slated for residential development suddenly took on national and international significance. The block miraculously escaped the Currowan fire, and is now packed with more animals than locals have ever seen – they are diligently maintaining feeding and watering stations to help them recover. Protesting under the

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<sup>60</sup> It is irrelevant what the Morrison Government does because the management of public forests for whatever purpose is a state responsibility. In any case, there has never been any suggestion of a ‘let ‘er rip deregulatory agenda’ in relation to forests and to suggest it is possible or likely is just irrational activist rhetoric.

<sup>61</sup> The so-called ‘culture wars on forests’ has been initiated and sustained for over 40 years by environmental activists that inhabit the left side of politics (Labor and Greens). The mostly rural and regional workers who are directly impacted by the assault on their livelihoods and lifestyles are therefore more likely to support the Coalition. However, it’s non-sensical to suggest that the Coalition and its rural supporters would prefer this conflict to continue rather than end, given that their jobs are on the line.

<sup>62</sup> There are already environmental groups strongly opposed to plantation forestry, largely on the grounds of its requirement for pesticide and fertiliser use. Older thinned hardwood plantations grown longer for sawlogs can start to resemble natural forests beyond 25-years, and campaigns against the harvesting of 40+ year old mountain ash plantations in Victoria’s South Gippsland in the early to mid-2000s led to a substantial area being turned into conservation reserves. Similarly, the presence of exploding numbers of koala’s in blue gum plantations (eg. SW Victoria and Kangaroo Island) have created difficulties with environmentalists and led to (at this stage relatively minor) constraints to harvesting practices. There is potential for this to eventually develop into blanket opposition, especially in relation to hardwood.

banner Manyana Matters, the residents got an injunction to save the unburnt block. Negotiations for a government purchase are progressing.

Further south at Murramarang National Park, a pilot citizen science program steered by Griffith University is under way, to monitor the burnt forest using a “bush recovery app” that uploads GPS coordinates, pictures, and a pro forma with details about the geography and condition of flora and fauna. Murramarang is a mixture of old growth and regrowth, and the extra burn severity in the more recently logged areas was obvious. I walked through with Virginia Young, a veteran forest activist and a director of the Great Eastern Ranges Connectivity Conservation Program. She says past damage from logging amplifies the impact of climate change, and if wildlife is to survive, forest management needs to change. “Half our wildlife depends on our forests, so does the vast majority of our water supply,” she tells me. “Our forests moderate the climate. It’s profoundly important that we try to restore them to their wettest state.”<sup>63</sup>

The national parks are sacred, so it’s the future of the 6 million hectares of native forest in public hands that is most contentious.<sup>64</sup> In some forest types it can take 60 to 100 years before a tree gets to sawlog age. With bushfire risk increasing, there is now an 80 per cent chance that trees will be burned before they reach maturity, says David Lindenmayer.<sup>65</sup> He compares native forest logging with overfishing, as an industry spiralling down the value chain – in forestry’s case, from taking high-value species to ever-lower-grade timber suitable only for use as woodchip or (the worst fear of conservationists) burning as biomass.<sup>66</sup> There could be far more jobs in saving forests – letting them mature and managing them to reduce fire risk, produce clean air and water, store carbon, protect endangered species and be enjoyed by tourists – than there are in cutting them down. “All we’re talking about here is the ideology of continuing to log native forests,” he says. There may be a need for a small proportion of native forest to be harvested for high-value uses such as furnishing and construction, but the days of sending the vast bulk of native timber off to be woodchipped are surely

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<sup>63</sup> Most Australian forests are naturally dry and were frequently cool burnt prior to European settlement. There is a distinct danger that the environmentalists’ wish to “*restore them to their wettest state*” will be counter-productive as it assumes less cool burning, thereby predisposing forests to periodic unnaturally severe fires in heavy un-reduced fuel loads. In reality we are already at this point, but the attitude displayed by Ms Young will, if widely adopted, constrain efforts by forest managers to restore forests back to their natural state via more extensive and frequent cool burning approximating, as far as possible, the pre-European levels of landscape fire.

<sup>64</sup> This sentence demonstrates a considerable lack of perspective. There is 132 million hectares of forest and woodland in Australia, so 6 million hectares of public multiple-use forest represents only a very small portion. Arguably the areas of far greater contention would be the almost half that is leased public land (largely for cattle grazing), and the approximately one quarter that is privately-owned. That’s around three-quarters that would mostly receive minimal management and be less subject to regulation.

<sup>65</sup> In most Australian forest types it would be normal for fires to occur multiple times before trees reach maturity, and depending on their intensity, to mostly have little effect on the capability to produce sawn timber albeit with increased levels of defect. It is really only in the wettest forest types where fires most commonly kill trees outright. Unfortunately, these are the most productive forests in terms of wood products.

<sup>66</sup> This is an interesting analogy because both forests and commercial fisheries in Australia have suffered excessive decline largely at the behest of environmental activism. When the most productive forests are progressively excluded from use (often on spurious grounds), it is an unfortunate reality that the remnant industry is forced to operate in lower quality forests that yield greater proportions of lower value products. Environmental activism has played a significant role in forcing this outcome, but typically misportray it as a problem solely created by the industry whilst never acknowledging their culpability.

coming to an end.<sup>67</sup> The Black Summer fires have changed the debate about native-forest logging, and there are worse fires to come as the planet heats up. From here on in – whether burnt or unburnt, old growth or regrowth – every patch of native forest matters.<sup>68</sup>

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#### PADDY MANNING

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<sup>67</sup> This is another ill-informed comment that is not cognisant of the reality that producing any high value product also creates a low value or waste by-product, which often dwarfs the volume of the targeted product. Before the days of wood-chipping, this waste was either left or burnt on the forest floor, or incinerated at sawmills where it accumulated as off-cuts from the sawmilling process. Using this waste for some commercial or advantageous purpose is sure more sensible than just wasting it, but it seems not to environmentalists who spruik for waste reduction but in this case are determined to dismantle the ways it can be achieved.

<sup>68</sup> This comment suggests that the author does not even realise that old growth forests have been excluded from harvesting for up to several decades in three states, and more recently in others where any harvesting has been very minimal and restricted to tiny patches or individual old trees. Furthermore, it ignores the reality that effectively dealing with the fire threat is significantly advantaged by maintaining a cohort of experienced workers and their machinery within the bush. If the bush is eventually vacated, fires will be even harder to control and the impacts will be far more widespread and severe than those attributable to logging and regenerating a small portion of our forests.