

A future for native forests means leisure, not logging

Magnificent places under threat

Think about it. Huge tracts of spectacularly forested hills. Panoramic ocean views periodically peek through the canopy. Creeks lined with lush rainforest trickle down gullies providing pure, clear water to downstream anglers and oyster farmers. Breakfast in the eco-lodge is peaceful and relaxing. But for those seeking more energetic pursuits, the relaxation doesn't last long! This is perfect terrain for mountain biking, orienteering, climbing, canyoning and adventure racing. An ancient landscape, not too steep like across the Tasman, but constantly undulating and changing form. Spectacular places to spend a weekend.

These are NSWs' State Forests. Two million hectares of public land, the majority found between Bega and Ballina east of the Great Divide. Forests that contain the best landscapes outside National Parks. But native forest logging shuts us out of these forests and prevents us from maximising their public benefit. Sure, Forestry Corporation will claim that recreation is allowed in State Forests and that's true. Until logging starts. At which point it's everyone out. And, sorry about this, but your bike track now runs through carnage.

Historically, most logs went to sawmills for wood chipping. Now there is a push to allow 'wood waste' from native forests to be classed as renewable energy under the Renewable Energy Target (as recent articles in *Wild* have outlined). Opponents of logging believe this is designed to prop up an unprofitable industry. A recent open letter to the Australian Parliament from 40 concerned scientists strongly opposed native forest biomass being defined as renewable¹.

A convergence of interests

We could have it so much better. There is another model for State Forests that is infinitely more equitable, sustainable and....fun! We can use our State Forests to dramatically expand high quality outdoor recreation, nature-based tourism and nature conservation. Despite having some of the finest landscapes for outdoor sports we lag far behind other countries. Anyone who has taken a trip to New Zealand will know how true that is. Here's how it could work. But first, a disclosure:

I'm an ecologist and passionate about the conservation of Australia's unique flora and fauna. I want my kids to be able to see the wonders that I have. This is my primary motivation to end native forest logging. But I also love hiking, mountain biking and cross country running. Most people in our organisation, the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA), love the outdoors almost as much as they dislike logging. That's the joy of this idea: conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts share a common interest!

A win for the environment...

From the NPA's point of view, National Parks are under siege. Everyone wants a piece of them because they are the most intact large landscapes left. But using them for recreation such as horse riding, mountain biking and large running events compromises conservation outcomes, spreads weeds and damages fragile species and ecosystems. Focusing these activities in lower conservation value State Forests would buffer National Parks while simultaneously expanding outdoor recreation opportunities. Talk about a win-win!

Some State Forests would become National Parks under this model. Primarily these would be areas that contain forest ecosystems that are under-represented in the National Parks network. Others

may be particularly important for iconic threatened species like koalas or quolls. But in light of the fact that the reserve network is heavily biased to upland areas^{2,3}, it's likely that many of outstanding ecosystems will be those on the coastal lowlands. Or, to put it another way, those that are flat and boring and not so much fun for recreation. Another win-win perhaps.

And a win for the community!

The remaining forests could be classified according to their attributes: those close to large towns and future urban growth areas which have suitable terrain could be prioritised for higher impact recreation. Those linking to National Parks could be prioritised for connectivity and low impact recreation. This would allow people maximum opportunities to get out and play and cater for the needs of a growing population, while still preserving important natural values. It may even help to prise kids away from screens.

There's no catch!

But what about wood? What about jobs? Well, the startling fact is, 80% of NSW's wood is produced from plantations⁴. In the last decade plantation wood production has steadily grown while native timber output has crashed. The once-mighty timber company Gunns went bankrupt, mills have closed all over the state. Forestry Corporation lost \$85 million between 2009 and 2012⁵. \$85 million paid for by the citizens of NSW. And their workforce has steadily declined to 596 in 2014⁶. In contrast, tourism directly employs 159,000 people across the state and is growing⁷. It's pretty clear on which side our bread is buttered.

We pay these huge sums of money for the privilege of driving our most iconic species to extinction⁸, stimulating forest dieback⁹, creating the only global deforestation front found in a developed nation¹⁰ and fuelling social conflict⁸. Temperate eucalypt forests are also some of the most carbon dense in the world¹¹: logging releases this carbon, which drives climate change which in turn is predicted to increase extreme weather events¹² in a country of extremes. Smart.

We could have it so much better. We could allow these remarkable forests to do what they do best: provide homes for wildlife and services to humans. And we could profit from it too. Investing resources into ecotourism will give NSW a future competitive advantage as our natural assets are the envy of billions of people worldwide. Grab a map. Have a look. It's almost possible to travel from the Victorian border to Nowra without leaving a state forest! It's not much different between Ballina and Port Macquarie.

How can we pay for this?

The reality is we are already paying for forest management via treasury grants to pay for fire management and feral animal control. Weeds are rife and a pain for neighbours. Forestry Corporation's business model doesn't account for these basic management requirements.

One funding model could see initial investment by government to provide infrastructure to support and encourage private tourism investors. A portion of their profits would pay for forest management and tourism infrastructure. New Zealand successfully operates such a model. Another option would be a user pays principle, much as the successful recreational fishing licence is currently operated, where forest recreational users pay a fee which goes toward the maintenance of infrastructure.

We must act right now

We have the chance of a generation right now. The Regional Forest Agreements expire in 2017-18. The commonwealth government wants to continue to prop up this ailing industry. Right now they're attempting to make sure our forests can be fed into furnaces to produce power, locking in deforestation and the demise of forest species.

But NSW doesn't have to play ball. We can become a world leader in outdoor adventure instead, opening up new tourism opportunities for regional areas. Conservationists, horse riders, mountain bikers, walkers, four-wheel drivers and all other outdoor fans need to work together to take this opportunity to end logging and take our forests back. It can be done. A conservative government in New Zealand managed it back in 1989. Together we are a formidable section of the population and together we can make this happen. Leisure, not logging, is the future.

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