



The Snug Wildlife Shelter

Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements

Firstly, thank you for allowing observations on the impact of Regional Forest Agreement's [RFA's] to be articulated.

Since the RFA's have been implemented, in our experience the wildlife; bird, mammalian and reptile species have declined to an extent where some are now rarely if ever seen, and the numbers so small, they have almost become a curiosity.

The extra load on roads carrying log truck traffic are not only an ongoing problem for wildlife, but also needing more frequent and larger areas of repair. The roads have more pot holes and bitumen shift, which creates ridges at the edge of developing pot holes, than before the bigger B double trucks populated the roads. These traffic hazards are ubiquitous and can be viewed on the alpine roads, even between the road widening and repair sections.

The contractor asked why these were not repaired while they were there attending to the others, stating those not done were created since they received the work order.

There is a lot more traffic from speeding four wheel drive utilities, obvious by their dress and what they carry, workers from the logging coupes, who tend to be in a rush to either get to the pub or home when they are relieved from their work. They kill a great number of wildlife on the roads with little if any damage to the bullbars that adorn the front of their vehicles. Some even target wildlife. No value to go into the mentality that makes them do this. Suffice to say that timber workers consider wildlife of all kinds a nuisance blocking them from more forest access.

Where once we saw many blue tongue lizards and stumpy tail skinks on the areas roads, warming themselves on the bitumen. They are now all but gone. In the first years when the log trucks started using the roads, great numbers were in evidence, killed, squashed, that it was cause for real concern. So it proved and now verified. When we travelled the roads and saw any alive, we stopped, picked them up and moved them into the vegetation at the edge of the road, but we could not save them all and did not save these in the end anyway. Currently we are amazed if we see one blue tongue lizard alive or squashed on the roads over the period of a year or longer. They have all but vanished.

There were many emus in the region, and the male with a clutch of 4 or 6 babies was common and created enjoyment for visitors. Over the years they also have all but vanished. At the present time we seldom see 2 emus, where once we were privileged to see dozens, and visitors to the area spoke about the excitement they experienced on seeing them.

Many bird species that were once plentiful are now seldom seen and some have completely disappeared. Thirty years ago we counted 76 different species of birds that could be found at some time in the year on our property. Cars carrying bird watchers would be parked along the Cassilis road. But not any more. The number of different bird species now would be more like 20 in number, and some of these are seldom seen.

An increased residential population can not be blamed for any of the issues mentioned, because the few who have purchased land in the area, have built modest houses and are in fact absentee landholders that come infrequently and irregularly except for Christmas, and stay for a short time only.

When the logging was less, there were more visitors and people using the accommodation available in the area, but this has decreased considerably since the animals they see in any number, are lying dead and broken on, or beside the roads. The death of wildlife is a cost much greater than the price received from the timber or the benefits of logging our precious forests.

There are logging coupes that have been exploited and burnt years previous and not replanted. They are still an eyesore in the rest of the forest. Even if replanted will never regain the beauty that was their hallmark, and never again deliver the same pleasure to walk through as before they were logged and the ground churned up.

Logging the national forests of Australia, the community owned forests of Victoria, should be managed, not exploited and degraded by whatever government takes over power. Logging timber is an archaic, backward activity that shows a lack of knowledge of the importance of forests and the care that is required to maintain them to maintain our air, water and soil quality.

There is land sufficient to grow species [radiate pine, mountain ash etc..] of varying quality for the purpose desired, that could be a backup and/or investment income for private land holders.

Once a forested area is destroyed, it will never be again as it was, fulfilling its function as it did, and will be much less useful and with less competition, introduced species will have more territory and opportunity to occupy. Even the regrowth timber will be of a lesser quality. This is well known, and yet logging of our forests, which the government has a mandate to preserve, continues.

If RFA's are to be of use, they should be managed so the carbon sequestering, monitored and proven, is the intent and practice. Any timber harvesting should be tightly regulated with that in mind. Before any logging is committed, there should be a audit of wildlife, tree species and understorey listed for future ref-

erence and made publicly available. Environmental laws must be overlaid and observed on any area to be logged and they must be obeyed.

Recently a coupe where logging had finished, the burning of the coupe went deep into the forest around it. This careless burn destroyed forest known to be habitat for the leadbeater's possum. Obviously there was no attempt to ensure the fire did not get out of control. A tragedy in the eyes of conservationists, animal lovers and wildlife carers, it would have been considered a boon by the logging contractor. Burning coupes should be in the hands of the CFA or other fire fighting and control authorities. Placing the care and protection of surrounding forest of a devastated coupe in the hands of the harvester and destroyer of that area is counter intuitive, even foolish.

All forest harvesting should be required to follow and compliance audited, of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) and made public. All forests must be recognised for their importance.

The most important improvement, if RFA's are still drafted, will be understanding the place in our environment of our forests, recognising all their values, and there are many. Conservation of forest biodiversity, maintaining ecosystem health, and being aware what will ensure the forest is working as it should. With area sufficient, which may require increase the main element in addressing climate change.

Working with and promoting traditional owner rights and partnership we can also address climate corruption and other large scale disturbances. Also identified as one of the top four potential improvements within the consultation paper.

Logging has already degraded our precious water catchments, intensified climate change and as we know first hand, is responsible for pushing what wildlife was once plentiful to precariously low numbers. Already endangered some native species are at functional extinction tipping points and in too many instances at the brink of extinction.

The main and most important function of our forests are NOT timber harvesting, but the important elements of survival for us all including wildlife, forest dependent industries including tourism and recreation, honey industry [apirists] and the water industry, as indicated in the consultation paper.

Modernising Victoria's RFA's can only work if forest biodiversity, connectivity throughout the state, maintaining the ecosystems health and regard for all forest values are just that, valued and recognised. Using existing research would be a good beginning to allow government to better manage Victorian forests. Applying the research, and good practice shown by this would be a great start. The forests we use have undergone obvious changes. Less wildlife and in areas where fuel reduction and environmental burns were conducted, an increase in area of bracken, and that taller. Understorey, the shelter and food for many wildlife species more sparse, indicating continuous fuel reduction and envi-

ronmental burns have destroyed the understorey. The homes of the ground dwelling wildlife, reptiles etc., are less and therefore they are under represented in number.

Being wildlife carers and transitioning from professional to amateur beekeepers, bush walkers of forests in different parts of Victoria. the changes are viewed as horrific. We know the beauty of all that live and grows and the function of forests. Relying hugely on the forest as soft release areas for our rehabilitated wildlife and honey production harvested from the flowering, nectar bearing eucalypts. We hope to save, for future generations the flora and fauna that remains after mining.

As shown by the middens of the traditional owners in this area certainly, they were able to manage the forest and live from its bounty without logging.

There is no need for RFA's. They can be impressively improved by removing them completely. They are a fallback position for those who wish to use our forest, as a reference to avoid actually thinking about an action contemplated to make money. RFA's do not allow for the plethora of changes in the dynamic of conditions of climate change, animal species and number endangerment, forest fires, bad management etc., etc., during any 12 month period.

Much more sensible, is harvesting only selected trees for a purpose, to be used by furniture makers and other users of the timber, who will pay a premium for the forest product. Not holus bolus destructive clearing of what was once a forested area. Harvesting timber and contributing oil and fuel spillage. But degrading and destroying so much more, understorey flora that protects the soil, wildlife food sources and habitat, soil disturbance. A process that turns value into too much waste.

Like environmental and fuel reduction burns RFA's are a deception. The too have not done what was purported, have never worked. VicForest has mostly ignored any reference to them. The amount of timber harvested in Victoria has been proven to be irresponsible and way over what was considered to be sustainable. Timber mills all over Victoria have closed, as they should and had no choice, under the current conditions of allowing harvesting beyond reason. The hue and cry that timber towns will die has not been the case. But instead of buying timber mills, and levering to destroy more forest instead of less. The Victorian government could have thrown that money at helping enterprises to pop up and flourish, keeping a timber town full of family businesses in several alternative industries.

In other countries, timber has been harvested as individual trees, only cut off the stump once a helicopter has grasped them, preventing them to fall, ensuring minimum disturbance or damage to the forest population round them. Mountain ash [*Eucalyptus regnans*] would be well suited to this type of harvesting. By so doing would allow only a few select trees to be removed from an area, leaving all the other valuable elements of a forest, much as it was.

If RFA's are retained, for harvesting timber, for any system of harvesting, they should be assessed every 12 months reviewed every two years, three at most. Even then a great deal of damage can occur before it is noted in a review. The assessor should be a panel of those competent with understanding and knowledge of forest importance and values as mentioned above. The authorised timber company and their contractor, by whatever name and whatever auspicer, will not report environmental problems that may impact their business, that is why an independent assessor in that form should be employed.

Applying science and knowledge focussing on the best for the forest and thereby our environment is the way out of this precarious climate change and motion of increasing extinction of flora and fauna. Australia is the extinction nation, and Victoria is the extinction capital.

What do we want for Victoria for our grandchildren? What do we love about Victoria to still be there for our grandchildren to show their children?

Governments do not understand the importance of forests, only see them as an means to an end. Not realising what a frightening finish this will deliver. It is dangerous to all, when a government is so out of touch on such a crucial issue.

Thank you for making the necessary corrections.

Sincerely,

