

Saving the NSW Forests - an on-going process

The major battle to save NSWs biologically diverse hardwood forests began in response to the 1969 commencement of woodchipping at Eden. The clearfell logging of 40 hectare forest compartments led to protests, scientific research and park proposals that prompted the first escarpment parks – the Deua-Wadbilliga National Park in 1979 being the most significant. The struggle was reignited in 1986, when an increase in woodchip exports triggered a Federal Environmental Impact Statement. Media attention and community concern were drawn to the majestic tall old growth trees being felled despite interim listings on the National Estate. How could the beautiful Coolangubra and Tantawangalo forests be saved?

A thousand protestors were arrested defending Coolangubra Wilderness from being slaughtered for woodchips. Bob Carr, then Minister for Planning and Environment, promised new national parks but was swept from office in March 1988. The woodchip export licence was approved in 1989, then deferred while NSW and Federal Governments tried to reach an agreement.

In the lead up to the next state election in 1995 forests were politically prominent and the Fahey Government reserved some 40,000 ha in the south east forests, including a 10,000 hectare Coolangubra National Park mostly over the steepest areas. The incoming Carr Government ultimately brought into being a 134,000 hectare South East Forest National Park, exceeding its election promise by over 40,000 hectares and saving what was left of the wilderness.

It was, however, the North East Forest Alliance that triggered progress for forest conservation. A series of strategic forest logging blockades and legal actions brought about the political environment where conservationists could have a say in the fate of the forests. The Chaelundi forest was a focal point for blockades where in 1990 many arrests and forest litigation secured a logging moratorium over some old growth forests. This pressure obliged the Greiner Government to prepare Environmental Impact Statements before logging the old growth.

Further court action to protect wildlife of the Chaelundi forests resulted in the Endangered Fauna (Interim Protection) Act in 1991. The NSW Government then experienced a crisis as industry wanted to log endangered fauna habitat. Its solution, a Timber Industry (Interim Protection) Act, 1992, enabled logging to continue while environmental impact and wilderness assessments were undertaken. This process fell into a shambles by 1994, as logging old growth forests and wilderness continued.

These protests and legal actions were repeated in many forests around Australia and the Federal Government then moved to rid itself of licencing woodchip exports.

The National Forest Policy Statement

The solution was National Forest Policy Statement signed by the Premiers of all states, except Tasmania, and the Prime Minister in 1992. This Statement declared that “until the assessments [of native forests for conservation values] are completed, forest management agencies will avoid activities that may significantly affect those areas of old-growth and wilderness that are likely to have high conservation value.” World Heritage and old growth forest values were to be assessed and where identified protected and in the case of wilderness 90 per cent was to be protected.

All states then made bilateral agreements, known as regional forested agreements, and enshrined these in legislation. Two contingent outcomes of these agreements were that the Federal Government would not further involve itself with forest management and the native forest logging industry be granted extensive resource security for decades without further assessment.

For NSW this process started in earnest when Labor came to power in March 1995 with specific forest and wilderness protection policies. Soon after the Carr Government stopped logging in wilderness areas and old growth forests and set up the Resource and Conservation Assessment Council to oversee many specialist studies.

In NSW the statement was implemented through rational decision making, where interest groups used computers and large amounts of data to negotiate land management agreements using scientifically-based decision rules. It's a process light years in advance of today's 'Captain's Call' where billions of tax dollars are committed on the recommendations of self-interested corporates (e.g. Westconnex and Snowy 2.0).

Forestry and National Parks Estate Act, 1998, preceded the signing of the RFA documents that saw 380,000 hectares of national parks were created in the north east of NSW followed by NSW 325,000 hectares of new national parks in the southern region. These decisions were augmented by additional reservations before and after the agreement, including in the Eden Region. Through these reservations, the wilderness estate was tripled, from 650,000 hectares in March 1995 to over 2 million hectares by February 2011. These reservation processes continue for 40,000 hectares of wilderness on Crown leasehold land, but the NPWS has virtually no funds for strategic acquisitions.

Regional Forests Agreements were not a final solution

The forest agreements did not resolve conflict. It is unsurprising that the data on sawlog yields, old growth, rainforests and threatened wildlife distribution were inadequate and few targets for a Comprehensive Representative and Adequate reserve system were achieved. These are tasks worthy of generations of scientific work.

The vision of a series of World Heritage listed eucalypt forest national parks stretching the length of NSW Great Escarpment remains outstanding business under the forest agreements. We should be proud of our forest national parks, celebrate them, and give them the international recognition and federal funding they deserve.

The forest agreements are twenty years old and have outlived their usefulness. The comprehensive representative and adequate reserve system essentially requires all remaining public forests because most forest types have been heavily cleared. With some exceptions, like Waratah Gully in the Coolangubra, much of the reserved remnant forests clinging to the backcountry are not highly nutritious for our forest wildlife, so populations of threatened species, including koalas, decline.

The regional forest agreements have also failed the logging industry because of the absence of logs to meet legislated quotas. Under these agreements Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management, like single tree selection, have become clear felling operations. Alternative coupe clear felling is being extended into 140,000 hectares of public forests from Taree to Grafton. Former Chief Executive of the EPA, Barry Buffier, described the logging as a conversion of native forests to "quasi plantations" (pers. comm.). Our forest wildlife will not survive if natural forests become tree farms.

To renew Regional Forest Agreements will ensure the destruction of hardwood forest diversity and produce second-rate plantations prone to erosion, die-back and weed infestation.

Federal Labor opposition and the Coalition government are determined to renew these agreements, to avoid a return to environmental impact assessment. This is a mistake as continued logging will see a drastic decline in sawlog yields and wildlife diversity.

According to Dailan Pugh of the North East Forest Alliance, NSW taxpayers have paid at least \$12.9 million to buy back timber committed in Wood Supply Agreements to North Coast sawmillers for trees that never existed. As time goes on Governments will become unwilling to continue compensation for legislated timber quota allocations in 'phantom forests'.

The solution is a policy of transition for the hardwood forest industry into plantations established on cleared productive private land, where trees will build carbon stores and timber can be intensively farmed. The politically poisonous alternative, the industry campaign to push back environmental protection, make the forest agreements permanent and log national parks, the so-called 'nil-tenure' solution, must be stopped.