

RESCUING THE TALLEST HARDWOOD TREES ON EARTH

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What a wondrous experience it is to wander through the magical forested Valley of the Giants, in the Styx forest in southern Tasmania. Climbing over the twisted moss and lichen-covered roots of this Tolkien-like forest I am surrounded by towering giants – many taller than a 25-storey building, over four hundred years old and up to five metres wide at the base!

In one sense those of us wending our way into the depths of this temperate rainforest are completing a two-hundred-year-old journey. We are the ones who come out here, not to get away from it all but *to get back to it all*. As we commemorate the bicentenary of European settlement on the island many of my generation have a strong sense of place out here and an intense appreciation of our precious heritage. We are coming home to sing Christmas carols underneath a giant eucalypt deep in a primeval forest we are desperate to save.

As I walk on I am aware of the purity and richness of it all; so many diverse species all in different stages of life and decay, living riotously together, recreating their form in an undisturbed continuum stretching back through 65 million years of eco-history. I am thinking as I walk that this is no longer a green issue. It is a profound moral question, for there is now only thirteen per cent of the original cover of these huge trees left in this island state, the most forested state of Australia.

The light rain eases and mist rises as we reach our flagship, a giant Mountain Ash, *Eucalyptus regnans*, towering ninety metres in this Valley of the Giants. I rig a waterproof banner horizontally to protect the music stands and the brass band assembled there in a close waterproofed knot. Soon the voices of gospel singers rise ethereally through the evening mist, a cluster of red “Santa” hats against the rich green moss. The Aboriginal flag is fluttering, black, red and yellow, catching a faint breeze, as we raise our voices in the gloaming.

That movement signifies to me that we *whities* are just beginning to understand how important the land is, in its entirety; how sacred is this Mother Earth to Aboriginal people here in Tasmania. We sing and clap and are filled with a great camaraderie, born of a determination that will see these giants – just part of the whole forest - saved. Then, as night descends, the singing is over and the world’s tallest Christmas tree responds, magically: a myriad of tiny lights twinkle, from the lowest limbs, along branches, up the tall trunk to the bright star in the leafy tops....

In 1999 a similar giant *regnans* was lit up by two thousand fairy lights and a four metre star. Subsequently that tree was placed in the Guinness Book of Records as the World’s Tallest Christmas Tree. Tonight’s pilgrimage was to another tree, one just as tall but chosen this year because it is threatened by imminent logging.

Accelerated clearfelling of public forests is on a scale so vast that the landscape of Tasmania is being transformed and the cry is echoing around the globe. This giant *Eucalyptus regnans* houses three activists. Two of Australia’s largest environmental organisations, Greenpeace and The Wilderness Society, have combined to highlight the plight of Tasmania’s ancient forests. Located 65 metres above the ground in the world’s highest tree-sit, a unique high-

tech Global Rescue Station was staffed in 2003-2004 by a team of peaceful activists beaming messages around the world via satellite.

The website features updates, images and sound bites and receives messages of support. The Global Rescue Station in the Styx was symbolic, a call to the world on behalf of ancient old growth forests everywhere, because of their role in keeping us alive: these mighty trees are literally the lungs of the world.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the island, in the Tarkine, 20,000 hectares of rainforest, one of the last remaining Gondwanic-origin temperate rainforests in the world, was about to be ripped to pieces by the logging machinery. With over fifty threatened plant and animal species, a vast wealth of Aboriginal heritage and some of the wildest coastline in the world, support for preservation of the rainforest was building. The region is still remote, wild and sacred. This is a land where giant freshwater crayfish battle beside bubbling tea-coloured creeks and the wedge-tailed eagle soars above flowering heathlands. The call for world heritage recognition was redoubled.

On 13 May 2005 the Federal Liberal Howard Government announced it was protecting half of the Styx forest and a large swathe of the Tarkine. The win that this represented spurred us all on to see the task completed. The efforts of hundreds of activists and many organizations had clearly been vindicated. But even as we continue the call for world heritage protection of the Tarkine, there are plans afoot to raze the rainforest core of this wild land.

It is always worth the struggle to make gains. But there it is, there is a distance to go in completing the task and all the while logging goes on, relentless, advancing deeper into the wilds of Tasmania's remote and irreplaceable valleys. The woodchipping in this island has been likened to an ecological catastrophe, threatening not only biodiversity but the economic future of Tasmanians, their heritage and even their political voice. Many people have been too frightened to speak publicly of their concerns for fear of losing jobs, friends and influence.

Then, in the wake of the so-called Gunns20 litigation of late 2004, when twenty activists were sued by the woodchipping giant Gunns, the fear that stifles dissent cowed the media and stunted society and our democratic institutions. In 2006 the battle in Tasmania is now as much about freedom of speech as it is about wild lands. In an act of supreme selflessness, Senator Bob Brown has sued Forestry Tasmania on behalf of three rare and threatened species in the Wielangta forest in south-east Tasmania. The trial is continuing and represents a landmark for science-law and the rights of nature.

Over 10,000 football fields of native forest are clearfelled and burnt in Tasmania every year - some 20,000 hectares. Forest practices are akin to those of third world countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil, and involve complete removal of the vegetation, followed by very hot burns and poisoning. Thus the massive *El Grande*, a giant Mountain Ash with a circumference of twenty metres, the largest living thing in the Southern Hemisphere, was accidentally burnt and killed during a regeneration burn in 2003.

The 1080 poison kills browsing marsupials which would otherwise feed on the seedlings of a new uniform crop of trees. In the first five years of this century, 60,000 hectares of forests have been cleared in Tasmania, usually to make way for plantations. Plantations are monocultures of introduced species (*Pinus radiata*) or genetically modified eucalypts. To my

mind this rapid and relentless transmogrification of the Tasmanian landscape is happening through the greed born of society's severance from nature, and the loss of historical perspective.

Ironically, Tasmania has an international reputation for the beauty of its wilderness areas: spectacularly carved glacial lakes and rivers, tumultuous quartzite mountain ranges and rugged coastlines dotted with white sandy beaches. While much of the scenic landscape is protected within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, the tortuous eastern boundary of this region was kept up at the treeline, specifically excluding the tall oldgrowth forests of valleys such as the Picton, the Weld, the Styx and the Florentine, so that they could be decimated by the state's rapacious logging industry.

It is difficult now to comprehend the size of the trees that existed at the time of white settlement, and the sheer extent of the great temperate forests. Nevertheless, what remains of those forests today is largely what makes Tasmania a life-changing, empowering island, a last stronghold echoing an ancient past.

When I walk deep into the forests I touch other, earlier, times, and feel empowered to go back to the human-dominated world and fight on. I am energized. If we lose this connectedness with our primal genetic origins, we die a slow spiritual death.

It is little wonder this island was the birthplace of global green politics and remains pivotal in world environmental politics. Strong and sustained actions failed to save Lake Pedder from being flooded by a power development scheme in 1972 but were the catalyst for ongoing opposition to dam-building and woodchipping. Peaceful activists in Tasmania have regularly chained themselves to bulldozers, to gates, to woodchip-loading towers and company office hardware. They have climbed trees and held rallies, funerals and wakes outside houses of parliament; they have blockaded rivers, roads and forest machinery; planted trees and painted white crosses on stumps; erected tripods over bridges and now regularly go to court. If the law is wrong the proper place for a citizen may just still have to be jail. There is too much at stake.

Conservationists are not just *opposing* what they know to be wrong, however. They are also developing alternative strategies and ecologically sustainable alternatives to massive clearfelling practices. For example, the One Tree Project is small but inspirational. It was conceived in the late 1990s and continues to expand the original concept of leading by example.

One Tree initially aimed to highlight the true value of the forests by exhibiting the produce that can be created from just one tree destined for nothing more than a pile of woodchips. One mill-rejected stringybark eucalypt with a forestry value of just \$100 was transformed into over fifty finely-crafted products which were exhibited around the country and auctioned on the internet. The money raised secured the rights to selectively harvest an area previously designated for clearfelling, under an internationally accredited timber certification. A growing number of inspired timber workers and craftspeople in Tasmania are now demonstrating the true worth of value-adding timber, a plus for employment *and* the natural environment.

These are empowered, questioning young people in the main, with passion and ideas. They are the most creative of their generation; organizing consumer boycotts and art exhibitions;

taking their message around the island by bicycle (*Forest Cycle*); engineering extraordinary general meetings of company shareholders. However, the brightest minds of a generation are often still relegated to the role of 'protestors', marginalized and demonised by timid local media.

Having participated in the relentless Tasmanian campaigns for thirty years, I am a sad yet desperate witness as one more beautiful place after another, each unique and irreplaceable, is destroyed. How do I cope, you may well ask, when, despite massive public opposition to the logging, power remains firmly in the hands of the corporate bosses and a self-regulating forest corporation removed by law from public scrutiny?

Multinational logging corporations hold the unions and the politicians in an unholy alliance through the power of strategic donations, well-oiled publicity machines, the promise of *jobs, jobs, jobs* and their own self-serving version of forest science. The spin-doctors have co-opted the *clean, green and clever* language of the environmentalists, exploited its advertising advantage and the gullible economic rationalists fall into line! How does one cope?

I have spoken with students, foresters and politicians on three continents, who, on the basis of hard evidence, all regard our forest practices in Tasmania as third world. I feel ashamed and realise afresh we really haven't got a lot of time left - in 2003 alone the rapacious industry exported another five billion tonnes of our precious forests, over one-fifth of it entailing the destruction of ancient eco-systems. The figure kept rising. In the face of irrefutable evidence of serious climate change our lack of response, as a society, seems so nonsensical.

Yet with the global market for its native forest woodchips drying up in 2006, the Tasmanian Government is now planning to throw everything into an equally precarious Gunns pulp mill, which is likely to become the biggest white elephant in Tasmania's big collection of them. The mill could increase the state's grotesque wood harvest volumes by as much as twenty per cent, while also increasing its lead in the race for the lowest rate of forest product value recovery in the world. While plantation timber will be utilised, the oldgrowth wood is still required for blending and the pressure will still be on for the last of the big trees. ABC-TV personality Peter Cundall said at an anti pulp mill rally last year: 'if we don't want a pulp mill we won't have a pulp mill'. That reminded me so much of the steadfastness of Milo Dunphy.

Personally, I have been uplifted and enriched by the experience of the extraordinary teamwork and perseverance of some of the best people on this planet! Furthermore we owe it to our children to fight on with hope and it is important to, at very least, bear witness.

Alarm bells are ringing around the globe and the work of an array of international writers and artists has put Tasmania in the spotlight. There is the sense of being on a great wave that is unstoppable, and, the tide having turned, it's about to break on a brave new shore where we do consider future generations, where a living tree has a higher value than a felled one. I hope to return to the Styx and the Weld frequently, to renew my tenuous links with the ancient songlines of the land.

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