

Logging Van Diemen's Land

Is there a green light for more sustainable forestry in Tasmania?



Although the origins of the Tasmanian forestry debate extend back decades, there's recently been a growing sense of ecological urgency from the green side that there could soon be nothing left to fight for; that continued logging of the state's native forests is causing an irreversible loss of international significance.

'Certainly in the wider scientific and environmental communities, it's recognised that we've really just about run out of time,' comments Dr Tony Norton, Professor of Spatial Information Science and Head of Geospatial Science at Melbourne's RMIT University.

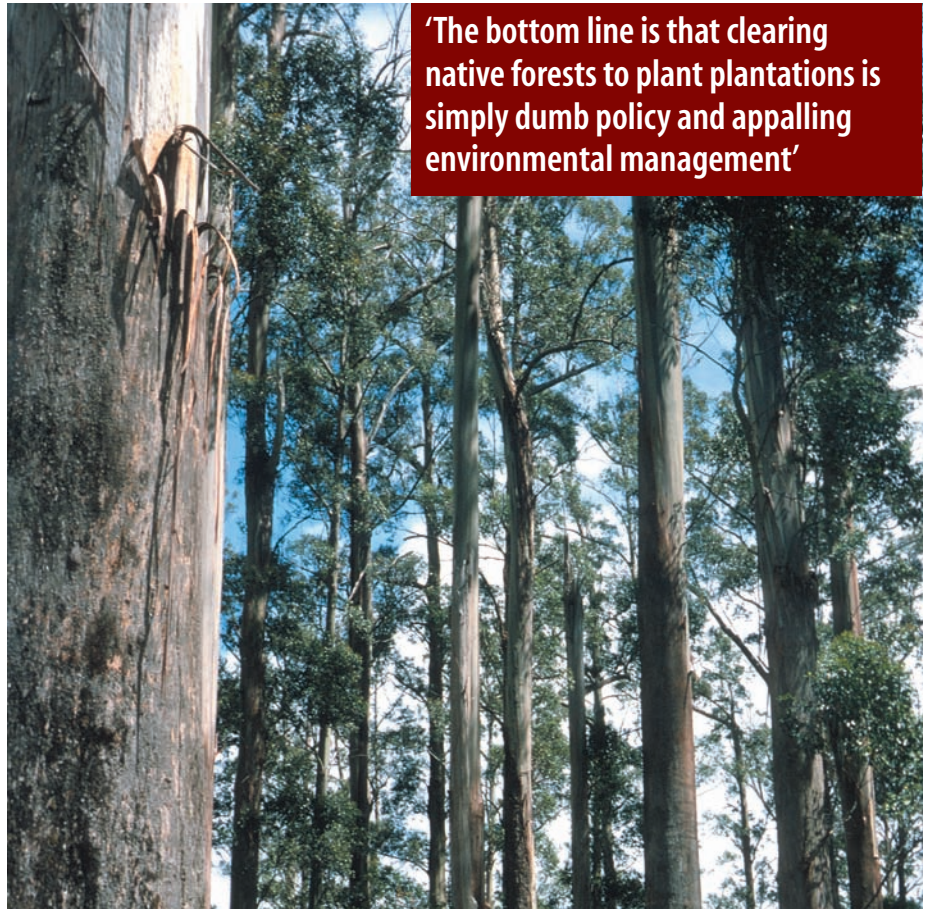
Norton was one of the key protagonists behind a public declaration calling for an end to old-growth logging in Tasmania which was placed as an advertisement in the *Australian* newspaper, other publications and on websites just before the 2004 Federal election. About 100 leading Australian scientists across a wide range of disciplines endorsed the statement.

'There are now more and more impacts on those high conservation value forests that were recognised some time ago but weren't protected,' Norton explains, referring to areas many scientists believe should have been reserved from logging according to the scientific rationale underpinning the Tasmanian Regional Forestry Agreement (RFA), but haven't.

'Certainly in my judgement and in my colleagues', if we were to wait one more election cycle – another three years – we're going to lose a lot of these areas and all of their biodiversity, landscape, wilderness and heritage values, not to mention the potential tourism, leisure and recreational amenity values they would have as well,' Norton says.

'We wanted to make it known very strongly, particularly to the Commonwealth Government, that if we didn't act now there would be no other significant opportunity to safeguard these remaining forests.'

On the so-called brown side of the debate, there's also a feeling that crunch time for the controversy is approaching. There is now a raft of action groups and



'The bottom line is that clearing native forests to plant plantations is simply dumb policy and appalling environmental management'

Mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*), found only in Tasmania and Victoria, is one of the world's tallest forest species with recorded heights of up to 100 m. Mountain ash forest provides diverse habitat for many species of native fauna. CSIRO Publishing

traditional environmental organisations dedicated to ending Tasmania's old-growth logging practices and there has also been a flurry of policy documents addressing the issue from industry bodies, political parties, government departments, environmental groups and even the Uniting Church.

Having been reproached in the British Parliament and with polls showing most Australians want an end to old-growth logging, Tasmania's forestry industry has been under siege. Many working in forestry with good intentions are understandably tired of criticism and of being perceived as uneducated and uncaring by the wider community.

All serious strategies proffering solu-

tions to the impasse anticipate job losses, some substantial, from regional locations throughout Tasmania. Many on the green side advocate retraining in, and a shift towards, tourism operations, possibly an option for young workers, but widely considered unrealistic for older employees. According to many social indicators, Tasmania is the most impoverished state and loggers are understandably prepared to fight for their jobs.

The green side, however, has managed some significant, although small, victories. The state government, for example, recently gave a commitment to an imminent phasing out of the practice of baiting native wildlife with 1080, the poison used

to kill animals that eat plantation seedlings, but also implicated in wider ecological impacts.

Beside poisoning and old-growth logging, there are several other strong criticisms about the way forestry operates in Tasmania. Many are uncomfortable, for example, that the industry is dominated by one economically and politically powerful commercial player, Gunns Ltd, the nation's largest timber company. Despite the debate raging around it, Gunns has just recorded a 42% increase in after-tax profits.

With forestry operations in Tasmania exempt from Freedom of Information legislation (now mooted to change) and development laws applying to other industries, many locals complain the industry's operations are covert.

'The industry is free from the constraints of much of the planning legislation that applies to most other forms of land clearing, development and natural resource use in the State,' explains Dr David Leaman, a geologist, geo-hydrologist and former lecturer and researcher at Hobart University who now works in private practice.

'... if you put up a forestry plan in Tasmania, nobody gets to look at it ... there's no cross-community processing of a forest plan and that means, of course, that if you're the neighbour and you think your water supply is going to be affected you've got no say in it.'

Much of Leaman's recent work has involved assisting local communities and landholders who believe forestry has affected, or could affect, catchment health.

'I don't object to forestry,' he stresses, 'but it has to be planned, it has to be able to be complained about if necessary, along with the same rules for everybody else.'

Despite such concerns, arguments against the Tasmanian industry have most loudly surrounded its continuing practice of clear-felling old-growth forests. And while the battle continues in Tasmania to save native trees with histories two and three times longer than that of European settlement, there are fears this focus has shifted attention from other concerning aspects of forestry operations.

One of Australia's leading forest ecologists, Dr David Lindenmayer, agrees there is a case for more old-growth forests to be protected from intensive exploitation through the State's reserve system, but believes there are 'deeper-seated issues that go beyond that.'

'And the biggest issue in Tasmania is conversion – the clearing of native forests



Left: clear-felling of native forest in parts of Tasmania continues for both wood-chipping and plantation development. Cleared areas never recover their original ecological dynamic. Right: Ecologists say plantation monoculture within original forest is highly disruptive.

CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products

to plant plantations,' he says.

Lindenmayer, Professor of Forest Ecology at the Australia National University, is supportive of well-managed plantation forestry but not at the expense of native forests.

'What happens is you start with a 50- or 60-year-old forest of native mountain ash, and basically push it over, mostly wood-chip it, and then replant, not with mountain ash, but with shining gum which is an exotic, or blue gum, or some sort of hybrid or even pine forest,' he explains. 'In this day and age, in 2004, that sort of third world approach to forestry is totally unacceptable. It's not good for the forests, it's not good for biodiversity and it's actually not good for the forest industry.'

Lindenmayer argues only land already cleared or partially cleared should be used for plantations.

'If you do that and maintain native forest as native forest then you actually end up with more forest with which to work with,' he says. 'So that's a win-win situation.'

Lindenmayer appreciates some exploitation of native forests (including those containing old-growth vegetation) will need to continue in Tasmania until the plantation estates grow enough to meet the state's markets for wood and wood products, or local logging communities find alternative revenue sources. He is adamant, however, that any harvesting in native forests needs to be very carefully managed. And clear-felling, he points out, doesn't come under the heading of good management.

'Clear-felling native forests has big negative impacts on the structure of those forests and the biodiversity component associated with them,' he says, pointing out that until 15 years ago it was still widely doubted that clear-felling had any effect on forest biodiversity. 'But we now know there are some really major effects. You lose



certain key elements of the forests like large hollow trees, large fallen logs, thickets of intense semi-fire resistant understorey and you change the abundance of some really key plants like ferns.'

The argument in favour of clear-felling has long been that the practice mimics the impact of major natural disturbances such as fire. The scientific evidence now dispels that belief too.

Research by Lindenmayer and others has shown that when a natural fire passes through the sorts of areas being clear-felled in Tasmania, not all of the forest burns at the same intensity. Wet gullies and flat plateaus, for example, are often only marginally affected.

'... these then create complex multi-aged forests – and they're actually some of the really important places for biodiversity,' Lindenmayer says.

So, where to for Tasmania? Lindenmayer can tolerate sustainable native forest logging using 21st century management and harvesting techniques based on sound science, but he remains incensed about the irreversible impact conversion is having on biodiversity.

'The bottom line is that clearing native forests to plant plantations is simply dumb policy and appalling environmental management,' he says. 'It has to stop and it has to stop now.'

● Karen McGhee

More information:
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Davey, S.M., Stuart M., Hoare, J. R. L. and Rumba, K. E. (2002). Science and its role in Australian Regional Forest Agreements. *International Forestry Review* 4(1): 39-55.
Lindenmayer, D. and Franklin, J. (2003). *Towards Forest Sustainability*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.