

COVER STORY

WOOD FOR THE TREES



On the 35th anniversary of Australia's first forest protest, Greg Foyster re-examines the so-called fight for the forests, and asks if the old image of greenies versus loggers is still relevant.

THE BLACK AND white photo shows two uniformed policemen dragging a male protester down a dirt track. His clothes are filthy and tattered, his hair matted in long dreadlocks. This is the first public image of Australia's first forest blockade, which erupted over plans to log remnant rainforest at Terania Creek, a quick Kombi ride from the hippy enclave of Nimbin in northeast NSW.

The photo [see contents page] occupied the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday 18 August 1979, which happened to be the 13th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. The parallels were obvious, and 10 days later they were made explicit in the paper's first big feature article on the blockade. "It was like Vietnam," wrote journalist Craig McGregor. "Dense green jungle, choppers in the sky, men with guns shouting into walkie-talkies, a bulldozer smashing through trees, people being carried off..."

The battle lines were clearly drawn: 'straight' versus counter-culture, developers versus conservationists, old versus young, loggers versus greenies. Thirty-five years later the issue is still portrayed in the same militaristic terms – as a dramatic clash between timber workers and environmentalists in the bush.

Recently, the conflict seems to be escalating. The Tasmanian upper house is considering a bill to repeal the Tasmanian Forests Agreement, the so-called peace deal brokered in 2011 between green groups, forest industry organisations and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). The move has the backing of the Federal Government, which has pursued a pro-forestry agenda since taking office, including an unsuccessful attempt to de-list 74,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest from the World Heritage Area. Environmentalists have launched counter-offensives to oppose the repeal. The overall impression is of two sides mobilising their troops.

But is this 'war' framing still accurate? What does it leave out of the picture? And why is Australia still fighting over trees?

International Forces

IN MARCH 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake sent a wave up to 40 metres high crashing into the northeastern coast of Japan's main island, inundating towns and killing more than 15,000 people. The media focused on the subsequent meltdown at Fukushima nuclear power plant, but the tsunami also damaged more than one million buildings, including the largest mill for Nippon Paper.

The financial ripples reached the Australian mainland, where Nippon Paper has a majority stake in the woodchip mill in Eden, NSW. The Eden mill has posted stellar profits for most of its existence, but incurred losses for 2011, 2012 and 2013 as demand for woodchips dropped among its Japanese customers. This disaster came after two years of lacklustre performance due to another calamity – the Global Financial Crisis.

The old view of loggers versus greenies ignores these international shocks. The focus is purely domestic, as if the forest industry's only barrier to prosperity is a bunch of ragtag activists blocking access to wood.

Fred Gale, associate professor in politics and international relations at the University of Tasmania, takes a more global – and sophisticated – view. On academic news website *The Conversation*, he wrote that although environmental lobbying has had some effect on native forest logging, there are also structural factors at work. These include a high Australian dollar, a decline in paper demand thanks to computerised workplaces, competition from plantations and the growth of third-party eco-certification schemes such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Gale completed his PhD at Carleton University in Canada, and on the phone his accent is distinctly North American. From 2004 to 2007, he tells me, the dominant Tasmanian forestry company, Gunns, was busy expanding its operations and seeking to build a pulp mill in northern Tasmania. Gunns bought up other businesses, in the process over-extending its debt. The company was heavily reliant on exporting woodchips to the Japanese market, which took a major hit during the GFC, leading to a dramatic drop in demand.

Gunns was put into administration in September 2012. On reduced demand from Japan, the administrators' report blames "a structural decline in the Japanese pulp and paper





“All these disputed areas feature the rarer types of forests.”

sector” and “depressed market conditions over the past three years due to the global financial crisis and natural disasters (earthquake and subsequent tsunami)”.

Rather than the victim of eco-saboteurs, Gunns is an example of a mega-company with a very fragile business model that was dependent on a single country to import its products. “When that country decided not to, there was simply nowhere else to go,” says Gale.

Plantation Nation

THE 30-TONNE harvester rumbles into view, crunching fallen branches under its tank-like treads. Tree trunks lie in piles alongside the dirt track and the air smells of pine resin. A timber worker in a hi-vis top watches nonchalantly from his ute; there are no protesters to worry about in this forest. Although the trees are 15 metres tall with a dense canopy, logging them is uncontentious and unpublicised.

And yet it is plantations like this one in Flowerdale, Victoria, that supply most of Australia’s wood. From the mid-1960s, Australia has been establishing softwood plantations – mostly radiata pine – for structural timber such as house frames. And from the 1990s, more and more eucalypts have been planted for woodchips. The result is that, by volume, currently more than 80% of logs harvested are from plantations. Even when Tasmanian woodchipping was booming in the early 2000s, 60% of all logs in Australia were

from plantations.

So why all the attention on native forest logging, as if it were the public face of forestry? It’s a question that has perplexed Judith Ajani, an economist at Australian National University, for decades. Her 2007 book *Forest Wars* argues that plantation sawmillers have remained silent because they were united with native forest loggers against a common enemy: environmentalists.

On the phone, Ajani sounds exasperated. “I think we as a society find it easy to focus on the battles between people and organisations that are very visible – in the forest issue, the traditional perception of loggers versus greenies.” But the internal battles between different sectors of the industry – native forest and plantation – aren’t in the media spotlight. “Then we have a lot of misperceptions both in the public arena and in the political or policy world about the nature of this industry, and so we miss out on opportunities to start to seriously resolve the forest conflict.”

What’s actually going on, she says, is that Tasmania has a large and growing resource of eucalypt plantations, providing a more sustainable and efficient supply of woodchips. “Why can’t we package that up in Australia as a good news story [that] we can have the best in an industry, both environmentally and economically? Instead, what we are getting packaged up for the



Australian public is this perception that this is a never-ending battle between greenies and loggers... It's madness."

If plantations can supply the vast majority of our sawn timber and woodchips, then why log native forests? The industry's answer is, it's for high-grade appearance timber used in things like furniture and flooring. Plantation pine isn't considered appealing or durable enough to do the job, and most plantation eucalypts are young, thin-trunked trees grown for pulp. The argument goes, that we need to keep logging those old, tall, thick-trunked trees in the bush because we can't get quality hardwood timber any other way.

Environmentalists retort that high-grade appearance timber is a front: hidden behind every polished mountain ash staircase is a colossal pile of woodchips (Ajani says such timber accounts for about 1% of the total Australian wood supply). Whatever the case, logging native forests to export woodchips is unpalatable to the public, so high-grade appearance timber is the industry's social licence. If you're sitting in an inner-city apartment wondering why we keep cutting down majestic ancient trees, take a good look at your dining table.

A Sense of Proportion

I VISIT FORESTRY consultant Mark Poynter at his home in the Melbourne suburb of Balwyn, on a street lined with oak and elm trees. Inside, his office is decorated with a large photo of shining gums (*Eucalyptus nitens*) in East Gippsland, where he worked as a forester for about six-and-a-half years of his more than 30-year career. Below that is a shelf displaying his Diploma from the School of Forestry in Creswick and various certificates from the Institute of Foresters of Australia. He owns a 40-hectare plantation in Tasmania's Upper Mersey Valley, but wonders if it will ever be harvested, now the industry is in disarray: "Which is a real shame 'cos there are some big trees on it. Good sawlog trees."

With his arms crossed over his chest, Poynter says the role of foresters is often misrepresented. "Foresters manage the forest. They've traditionally been in an adversarial role with the timber industry." But these days they're lumped in with the "logging industry", which ignores their historical achievements: in the early 1920s, foresters convinced state governments to reserve huge tracts of forest for future generations.

"I get really upset about all the lying because a lot of it is trashing the careers of myself and others," he says.

Compelled to set the record straight, Poynter responds to major articles on the conflict. In 2007, after *The Monthly* published a long essay on Gunns by Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan, Poynter wrote a letter to the magazine saying that "the first casualty of anti-forestry extremism is proportionality". In one of his own essays, published in *Quadrant*, he gives many examples: by sheer hectares

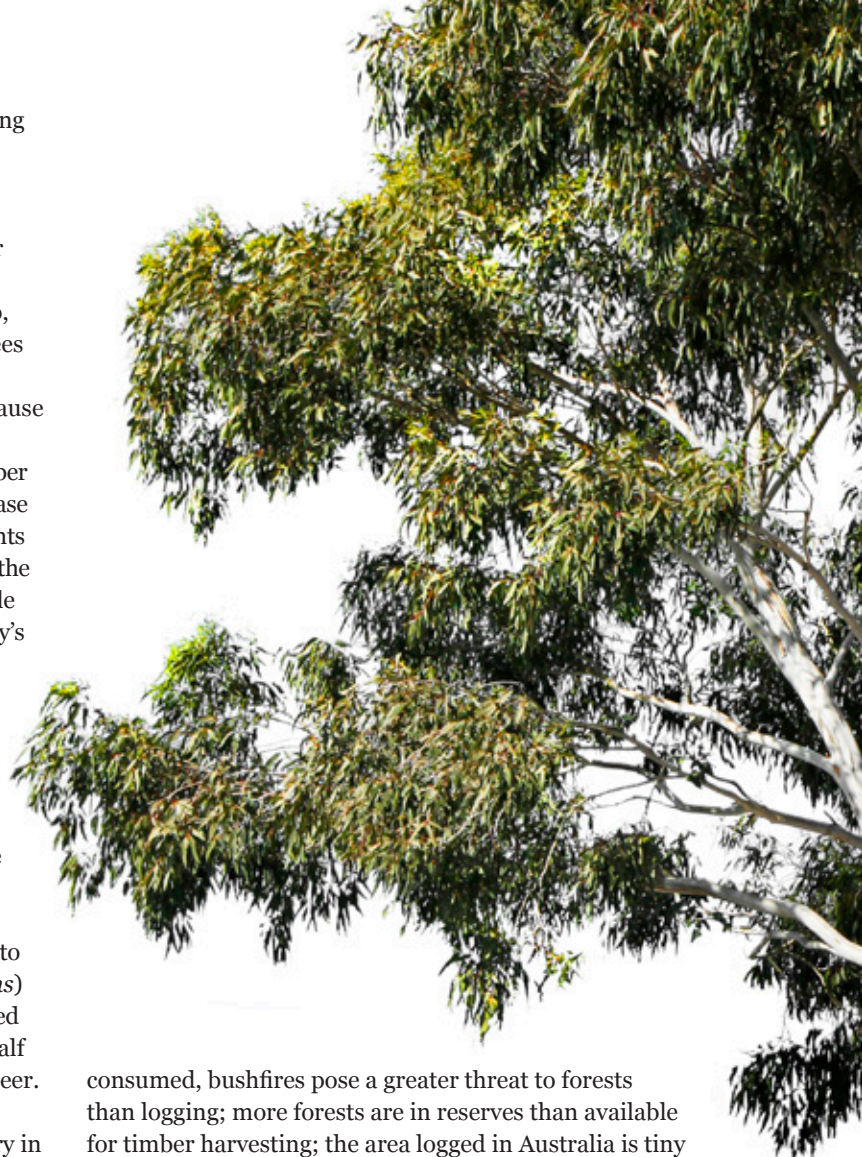
consumed, bushfires pose a greater threat to forests than logging; more forests are in reserves than available for timber harvesting; the area logged in Australia is tiny compared to deforestation in developing countries. He tells me Tasmania has only three million hectares of forest in total, but in 2004 Brazil was clearing 2.6 million hectares of Amazon rainforest annually, to be replaced with cattle ranches and soy bean farms. "Forestry in Tasmania is a tiny fraction of that," he says. "It's insignificant."

Different Perspectives

ON THE MAP, Australia's forests bloom across the continent in shades of emerald, pink and sky blue. There's a vein of navy in Tasmania's northwest, and a wedge of dark green in Victoria's western corner. Each colour represents a different type of forest, ranging from tall eucalypts to mangroves to rainforests.

This map is featured in *Australia's State of the Forests Report 2013*, which explains that Australia has abundant forests – 125 million hectares in total. Of that, only 5.5 million hectares is publicly owned and available for harvesting. It really does seem logging affects only a very small part of the whole.

But when I zoom in, a different picture emerges. It depends what you mean by 'forest'. As the report acknowledges, to many people it means "stands of tall, closely spaced trees". But of the 125 million hectares, more than 80 million hectares



are ‘woodland’, which means canopy cover of between 20% and 50% – a photo shows spindly, stunted trees on rocky ground in outback Queensland. Acacia scrub near Kalgoorlie is also included in the total. These ecosystems have their own unique values, but they’re not what the public considers to be forest, and they’re definitely not what activists are talking about when they chain themselves to giant trees and scream “we have so little left”.

So what type of forest is the forest conflict actually about? Looking at the map, some of the most bitterly contested battles have occurred over rainforests (3% of the total), tall closed eucalypt (0.1%) and tall open eucalypt (4%), often alongside medium open eucalypt (16%). Terania Creek, the Daintree, the Franklin River, the Otways, East Gippsland, Tasmania’s Southern Forests, the Tarkine – all these disputed areas feature the rarer types of forests.

The point isn’t that these forest types aren’t protected – they are, and in some states the reserves are extensive – but that the debate often comes down to a matter of perspective. To mount their case, foresters and forest agencies cite national or regional statistics, while activists measure the girth of individual trees in a single logging coupe. According to the book *Terania Creek: Rainforest Wars*, this divide between broad and narrow perspectives was a hallmark of the very first forest blockade. Thirty-five years later, the statistical skirmish continues. No wonder the conflict goes on; people can’t even agree on what they’re arguing about.


Trees versus Jobs

IT WAS ONE of the most extraordinary images of the 2004 federal election. After Labor’s Mark Latham pledged to lock up 240,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest, members of the CFMEU threw their support behind John Howard’s alternative policy, announced at a hall in Launceston. Howard told the assembled unionists that ending old-growth logging “should not occur at the expense of jobs”. His message was so warmly received that he was literally embraced by the crowd.


That’s unlikely to happen to PM Tony Abbott, and not just because he has a less cuddly physique. After Abbott told an industry gathering in March this year that Australia had enough national parks and that the government would “unlock the forests” to create jobs, the union contradicted him. “The PM’s plan will result in job losses – not job growth,” said Jane Calvert, national president for the forestry branch of the CFMEU, the next day.

Why the reversal in rhetoric? To find, out I meet Calvert at the union’s offices in West Melbourne, where she takes me through a history of the conflict. On the wall behind her are wood panels, carved from *Eucalyptus regnans*, which show timber workers from eras past sawing down trees by hand.

“It never was as simple as jobs versus the environment. That was always just



“By volume, currently more than 80% of logs harvested are from plantations.”





a cheap campaign slogan... It didn't capture the whole of the picture then, and it doesn't now."

For decades, says Calvert, various stakeholders in the debate have been caught up in short-term political cycles that don't resolve the issue. In the lead-up to an election, the lobbying intensifies, with each group seeking a win at the expense of another.

"So you have this washing machine of policy churning around, and lobbying and campaigning, and from time to time a party will make a commitment and implement it, and no one is ever happy, and the campaigning goes on."

The environment movement might win one round, the union another, industry a third. But ultimately everyone loses, because there's no certainty. From the union's perspective, stability is essential for investment, and therefore for market competitiveness and job creation. "All of our interests – jobs, investment and forests – all require such longer-term planning than an election cycle gives it."

This is why the union backed the Tasmanian Forests Agreement, which was a way to sort out the conflict directly, rather than through the intermediary of politics. While the agreement had support of federal and state Labor – an achievement in itself – it was never supported by the Liberals. "So inevitably when they got in, they were going to attack

it," says Calvert. "They've brought the issue of forest use and environment concerns right back into the election cycle."

AT THE END of my investigation, I find myself staring at another image. It's black and white, but it's not one-dimensional. It has sides, but more than two. It's a triangle, but it's not Green. It shows the pointy parts of the conflict, yes, but also the room for compromise. It's a diagram, created by Fred Gale, illustrating the various groups involved in Tasmania's forest debate. They're crouched in three corners, each representing a competing value: ecological conservation, economic growth and social welfare. Arrows point inward, indicating how, as part of the peace deal process, some groups gave up their positions on the fringe and moved into the centre. Over the phone, Gale told me this middle ground is mostly unexplored territory. "In Australia generally the forestry debate has evolved over the last 30 years or so into either lock it up or clear cut it, and in between those two perspectives there's an awful lot of room for eco-sensitive logging."

Gale's diagram isn't an arresting image. Nor is 'Compromise!' a particularly sexy headline. But compromise does show a level of maturity, and, after 35 years of adolescent finger-pointing, it's about time Australia's forest conflict came of age.

» *Greg Foyster is a Melbourne journalist and the author of Changing Gears. His last story for The Big Issue was 'Watching the Wheels' in Ed#442.*