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After 20 years of uneasy peace, the forest wars are back

Agreements meant to protect forests and create a sustainable timber industry are about to expire, and both sides are preparing for new conflict

by

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For more than 30 years Jill Redwood has fought to save the ancient old growth forests of East Gippsland in Victoria.

Living alone, isolated and self-sufficient on a small rural property in the Brodribb river valley alongside the Snowy river national park, Redwood, the coordinator of the East Gippsland Environment Centre, says there have been endless attempts to silence and frighten her. She's undaunted.

Nevertheless, a single sentence in an hour-long debate in the Senate in February on the future of Australia's native forests got under her skin. It was spoken by the Liberal senator Anne Ruston, the federal minister responsible for forests. "I'm sure that trees were put on this earth in the very first instance because they were able to be cut down, because they would grow again and because they would provide a resource for myriad different things."

Redwood was aghast: "It did more than offend. It enraged me. Ruston's statement encapsulated 30 years of ignorant promotion of forest destruction.

"It captured the shameless unscientific reasoning governments expect voters to swallow."

The Senate had been discussing a bill from the Greens forest spokeswoman, senator Janet Rice, to repeal the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) Act, which exempts logging from national environmental law.

Rice asked Ruston why logging could proceed even in habitats of rare and critically endangered swift parrots in Tasmania and Leadbeater's possums in Victoria.

"Other extractive industries such as mining are required to justify their impact on the environment, but not the native forest industry. They carve out special sections of forests to destroy them."

Ruston replied that according to former federal threatened species commissioner Gregory Andrews, "no Australian mammal has become extinct due to forestry

operations”, and that while she could understand the appeal of the possum, it appeared to be a “rather adaptable little critter ... the more we look for them, the more we find.”

It was too much for Rice, who interjected: “Listen to the science! Read the science!”

Ruston responded that she had read the science, but the problem in Australia was “an industry of scientists who have made a fortune trying to come up with inconveniently ill-informed and unfactually based misinformation because it suits their purposes.

“It’s about time somebody started calling out some members of our environmental scientific community for the rubbish that they put out in the marketplace, believing that the word ‘professor’ or ‘doctor’ before their name somehow gives them some sort of legitimacy to say things”.

Ben Oquist, the executive director of progressive thinktank the Australia Institute, sees parallels with the language and tactics used over the past two decades around climate science.

“Sometimes people dismiss the climate debate as just a culture war, but I actually think it’s very serious.

“The environmental reality of climate change, and the economic threats it poses, are not always seen clearly by the public. Yet it’s the experts and scientists who are pointing this out that get attacked.

“That’s what’s happened with climate change, and now it’s happening on native forest logging.”

The RFA agreements were intended to be the scientific response to the so-called “forest wars” that raged for two decades. In the 1980s and 1990s forests were front-page news. Premiers fought over forests with prime ministers, cabinets agonised over timber resources and votes, and official inquiries failed to find a square metre of common ground.

When logging trucks blockaded Parliament House in Canberra in January 1995, then Labor prime minister Paul Keating was apoplectic. According to one insider, at the height of the confrontation Keating threatened to call up the army and “bring in the tanks”.



Logging trucks blockaded Parliament House in January 1995. Photograph: Reg Alder/National Library of Australia

It was a turning point in Australia's political history. After two decades of high-profile stoushes and increasingly powerful and interventionist commonwealth environmental law making - saving national treasures like the Great Barrier Reef, the sands of Fraser Island, the Franklin River, the wet tropical rainforests of north Queensland, the floodplains and rock art of Kakadu, and part of the tall eucalypt forests of Tasmania - Keating wanted out.

He offered the states a deal to get forests off the federal table. If the states signed up for new conservation reserves and a sustainable timber industry, the commonwealth would exit the forest battlegrounds.

It was designed to be an honourable exit. Comprehensive regional assessments would identify and protect environmental values. For the first time, forestry operations would be carried out according to the principles of ecologically sustainable forest management and the National Forest Policy Statement, which was agreed between the commonwealth and states in 1992.

Under the RFAs, the commonwealth would "accredit" state-based forest management systems - with the intention that the protections would be reviewed every five years and equivalent to those under federal environment law.

Ten RFAs were signed in Victoria, NSW, Tasmania and WA between 1997 and 2001.

The agreements were for 20 years and - apart from Tasmania, which was renewed last year - are due to expire shortly.

With most of the states either late or failing to do the required five-yearly reviews - the subject of a recent federal court case - the impact of logging on federally listed threatened species has long been the nub of the argument.

"It's crazy, a total misnomer to have theoretically strong commonwealth environmental law, yet carve out a whole section of the environment - forests - that most of the population would think is most deserving of strong protection," says Oquist.

"Our forests should be owned and regulated for Australia's national and international interests. The system that's been put in place is not doing that and it's proven to be an environmental disaster."

With cursory public consultation - and before the benefit of official reviews to assess how the agreements have operated over the past 10 years - the commonwealth and states committed to renewing the RFAs on a five-yearly rolling basis, effectively forever.

The process of rolling over the RFAs is very different to what was intended.

Kim Taysom worked in the federal bureaucracy, rising to become a senior officer in the federal Treasury, then the Department of Finance. He's long retired but got interested in forest issues 30 years ago because his bush retreat on the south coast of NSW was surrounded by forests increasingly being targeted for wood chipping.

As a community stakeholder, he was directly involved in the negotiations that resulted in the first RFA in NSW for the Eden region, in August 1999.

"In the 1990s, we got access to ministers, good access, powerful people. They listened, they brought in independent scientists.

"We didn't get everything we wanted, but they listened. We got half of what we wanted, and the timber industry got more than half of what they wanted.

"This time round, when we went to political offices in Sydney and Canberra, we got no access to anybody with any power at all.

"There has been no compromise ... For those of us who believe in due process, things are looking pretty crook and we're heading into uncharted waters."

This lack of scientific oversight and the bypassing of the original process means the conflict is returning. The forest wars are back.

Lyndon Schneiders, a forest campaign veteran for the Wilderness Society, says: "The forest wars are coming again because state governments and the industry have not grasped this once-in-a-generation opportunity for change.

"Over the past 20 years, we've witnessed the ongoing economic decline of the native forest sector relative to the plantation sector. Whereas the plantation sector has attracted new investment and markets, the native forest sector is engaged in a mining operation to get the best of what's left before the game is up."

Ross Hampton, the chief executive officer of Australian Forest Products Association, sees things differently. He believes the RFAs ended the long-running debate and allayed community concern. While he won't name names, he clearly thinks Schneiders and groups like the Wilderness Society are increasingly isolated from the rest of the environment movement.

"Yeah, the forest wars are over. The forest industry lost the forest wars ... harvesting in native forests has declined by around 60% since the original forest agreement was signed.

"There's been this massive decline in the available area for timber, 3m hectares has disappeared into the conservation estate. The industry had some eight or 9m hectares

of [native] forest to operate in 20 or 25 years ago, now it's five-and-a-half million hectares.

“There were 800 hardwood sawmills in this country. There's now about 200 mills.

“You only have to look at where the focus of the major environmental green groups are these days, and it's not in forestry.

“Those who are continuing to argue for closing down forestry areas are really the smaller fry, if you like, in the environmental scene ... they're never going to stop their skirmishes until there's no [native] forestry in Australia.”

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, then NSW environment minister Bob Debus helped negotiate the conservation outcomes of the three NSW RFAs. At the time he thought the process was “extraordinary and innovative”. Twenty years later, he feels betrayed.

He says the RFAs have been subverted politically as the states dropped the ball on adequately enforcing environmental oversight and auditing.

“It often seems to me that the Liberal party kind of subcontracts the question of natural resource management to the National party. I know there are exceptions, but they [the Nationals] have an ethic that exploitation is a good thing. They're less sensitive to those other natural values of our country than the rest of Australia.”

Debus visited the Lorne state forest, inland from Port Macquarie on the NSW mid-north coast, in September last year. He was horrified by what he saw in Compartment 79, which had been recently logged and, he believes, is not in compliance with existing NSW logging rules.

Debus says he felt hoodwinked by the way this has played out. “It would seem they've been pulling the wool over everyone's eyes if this type of logging is called forestry. It's clearing and there's no scientific justification for it.”



Former NSW environment minister Bob Debus on a visit to the Lorne state forest. Photograph: National Parks Association

First with climate and now with forests, Debus feels that Australia has lost “the broad consensus for policies regarding nature conservation ... this area suddenly turned into a kind of culture war, in which any kind of conservation is regarded as somehow or other the work of the radical, dangerous Green Left.”

Hampton dismisses Debus's argument. "I think he's completely wrong. Forestry barely rated a mention in the recent Tasmanian election, for example. Native forestry really didn't rate a mention in the last federal election.

"There are some people who really want to reignite the issues of the past and get some of that anger and angst back from years ago, but most of the world's really moved on."

In the absence of a clear process, the argument often boils over about the plight of endangered species, such as the Leadbeater's possum, and its habitat.

Prof David Lindenmayer, from the Australian National University's Fenner school, has earned powerful political and industry enemies as the most high-profile scientist arguing the case against native forest logging.

"I get a lot of threats, a lot of physical threats, and I'd look and feel like a younger man without all the stuff that's been thrown at me over the years."

It was Lindenmayer's work that helped underpin the successful upgrading of Leadbeater's to critically endangered - the last stop before extinction - in April 2015 by then federal environment minister, Greg Hunt. He said at the time the independent scientific advice was "clear and unequivocal".

Using one of the world's longest running forest biodiversity projects, Lindenmayer, his colleagues and students have calculated that the Leadbeater's population has halved since 1997.

The crash for the greater glider is even worse, with populations declining by more than two thirds since 1997.

The upgraded protection for the possum in recent years has created chaos for the timber industry, with an additional 3,134 hectares quarantined from logging in the central highlands of Victoria.

According to VicForests, 218 new possum colonies have been verified since February 2015, but this data has been challenged with claims that some colonies may have been double or triple counted. Forest campaigners also claim that some Leadbeater's research has been paid for by logging interests.

Then deputy prime minister, Barnaby Joyce, got involved in March 2017 when he said that the possum listing "will cost jobs and ruin the forestry industry".

A few days later - on the basis of "new knowledge" and science - a formal submission from the Australian Forest Products Association triggered the process for environment minister, Josh Frydenberg, to consider downgrading the possum's protection status.

Hampton says, "What's the most frustrating for us is that - for all the purported care for the possum from some in the environment movement - it's absolutely clear to anyone who knows that part of the world ... it's not really about the possum. It's about closing the timber industry of Victoria."



The upgraded protection for the Leadbeater's possum in recent years has created chaos for the timber industry.
Photograph: Stanley Breeden/National Geographic/Getty Images

Formal advice that logging should be shut down in the central highlands - the most profitable remaining region for native forest logging in Victoria - is now included in the long-delayed recovery plan for the possum. After two-and-a-half years of deliberations, the advice came in 2015 from the commonwealth's threatened species scientific committee (pdf):

The most effective way to prevent further decline and rebuild the population of Leadbeater's possum is to cease timber harvesting within montane ash forests of the central highlands."

Asked if he felt Ruston's comments in the Senate debate were an attack, either on him personally or the science, Lindenmeyer said he thought they were an attack on both.

"I'm saddened that people don't want to see what the science is saying. The reality is that those forests are under significant stress, in danger of ecosystem collapse. That's what the science is showing and I'm afraid if some people don't like the science, that's their problem.

"It's nonsensical to have a forest policy with agreements that are based on hopelessly out-of-date information. It's like having a media policy without considering the internet.

"We've had 20 years of solid research which shows the other values of native forests - for climate change mitigation, for water production, for tourism, for better managing fire. There's an enormous amount of new information that actually needs to be considered before you simply roll over an RFA."

Over on her Brodribb river valley property, Redwood is not optimistic about the outcome if the east Gippsland RFA is renewed for another 20 years. So what's she still fighting for?

"Scraps. Scraps of valuable forests that have not been logged yet ... there's so little left."

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