

The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

David Hill



To the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning

My name is David Hill and I live in Melbourne's inner west in Seddon. I grew up in Williamstown and always enjoyed its coastal environment as a child. As an adult I have watched how Williamstown has changed over the years and its coastline around the former Rifle Range opened to the public. The location and tranquillity of that area is a haven for native plants and animals and it is pleasing to see the level of interest the local community has in caring for it. Similarly, the transformation of the former Newport quarry into the Newport Lakes is another wonderful sanctuary in Melbourne's inner west. It is these sorts of places where people can enjoy the natural environment and appreciate what it has to offer.

These formative influences, combined with my late father's passion for tree planting and protecting native forests, has led me to have a lifelong interest in nature conservation. Like a lot of people, I support several organisations concerned about protecting our environment and the special places that people enjoy. These include rivers, wetlands, woodlands and old growth native forests.

I have many conservation interests, but my main focus is protecting our old growth native forests. I am making this submission to this inquiry because I am concerned that current environmental practices, such as industrial scale logging of Victoria's native forests, are having a severely detrimental effect on the State's ecosystems and endangering the future of much of Victoria's native flora and fauna. For example, VicForests, Victoria's State-owned timber agency, is allowed to 'harvest' (clearfell) 3,500ha of old growth native forest per year¹ or the equivalent of 5 MCG playing areas per day². It has been well publicised in the media³ and through legal action^{4,5} that this scale of logging is unsustainable from a resource perspective and is further endangering already threatened species such as the Greater Glider and Leadbeaters Possum, Victoria's faunal emblem⁶. VicForests' logging activities and its impact on animal habitats is clearly shown by this picture of a VicForests' logging coupe at Acheron in Victoria's Central Highlands. This is the sort of activity more commonly associated with illegal logging in places like Indonesia and Brazil rather than in Victoria where logging is supposedly subject to strict regulations, but evidently not. Looking at such readily available pictures highlights the issues associated with VicForests' logging practices and calls into question the regulations which govern its activities.

¹ <https://www.vicforests.com.au/static/uploads/files/fs-nativetimber-web-wfvjzqtszs.pdf>

² <https://mcgthehistory.weebly.com/size-and-capacity.html>

³ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/not-policing-our-own-backyard-victorian-forestry-industry-breaches-logging-rule-20200312-p549ix.html>

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/bunnings-vicforests-timber/12412642>

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-19/vicforests-plan-to-log-native-ash-trees-on-public-land-maps-show/11805812?nw=0>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/27/vicforests-breached-forestry-agreement-with-central-highlands-logging-court-rules>



I was first exposed to such devastating and appalling logging practices in Victoria when I visited the Toolangi region, 80 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, nearly a decade ago. I was horrified at what I saw. I was equally appalled when I went camping at Rubicon, 100 kilometres north-east of Melbourne and saw similar devastation of old growth Mountain Ash forests, the tallest flowering plant in the world⁷. I could not believe that such logging practices were allowed in the 21st century in Victoria and continue today. If these were tree farms on plantations it would be an acceptable practice, but to clearfell old growth forest is destroying complex ecosystems that, in many cases, have taken hundreds of years to develop. Again, are we in countries like Indonesia and Brazil where logging is poorly regulated and often illegal or Australia where logging is supposedly more highly monitored and regulated? Looking at pictures like these, it is clear that logging practices in Victoria are highly destructive to animal habitats and no better than in countries where logging is supposedly less well regulated. While VicForests contends it regenerates the forests it clearfells⁸, it is questionable whether clearfelling a forest then re-growing it is the best way to harvest timber and manage the complex flora and fauna ecosystems that old growth forests contain.



⁷ <https://ridingforthegreatforest.com/introduction-to-victorias-mountain-ash-forests/>

⁸ <https://www.vicforests.com.au/regrowing-our-forests-1/regrowing-our-forests>

As well as the sheer devastation of clearfell logging shown in these pictures, the saddest aspect of such logging is the sound of silence. What was once a thriving wildlife habitat is now a barren wasteland with the sounds of nature, particularly birdlife, extinct and unlikely to return for many years even if the area is replanted. For animals that rely on tree hollows for their survival, such as Leadbeaters Possums, they will not return for over 100 years until such hollows develop in replanted forest.

It is evident that there are fundamental flaws in the way in which Victoria's native forests are managed under Regional Forest Agreements with the Federal Government. In particular under the Federal Environment Biodiversity and Conservation Act, forestry operations are exempt from assessment if they are conducted in accordance with a Regional Forestry Agreement.⁹ In Victoria, these agreements include a code of practice that sets out conditions logging operations must meet, including in relation to threatened species. Even with such a Code of Practice it does seem rather odd that logging of old growth native forests is exempt from federal legislation.

It is significant that the Federal Court found that VicForests had breached the code of practice in its agreement and that its agreement and exemption from national law were, in effect, invalid. VicForests had also breached the code of practice by not complying with the precautionary principle relating to conservation of the environment.

With regard to the supposed importance of the logging industry to regional employment, in 2016 there were only 1371 people employed in forestry and logging operations out of a total of 16,735 in the forest industry sector (0.54% of Victorian employment).¹⁰ In September 2017, timber company Carter Holt Harvey in Traralgon closed with the loss of 160 jobs. Over the last 20 years many industries have shut down – a few years ago the City of Geelong, for example, experienced the closure of Ford, Shell and Target with the loss of 1,000 jobs. Whales in Australian waters are no longer hunted and killed. Instead, whale watching supports a thriving tourism industry in many coastal regional areas. Fifty years ago the town of Byron Bay in northern NSW was dependent on whaling, logging and an abattoir – now its economy is supported by tourism. The town of Forrest in Victoria's Otway ranges once depended on logging, but has also converted its economy to tourism. The point about these examples is that regional economies presently dependent on unsustainable logging can transform their economies into more sustainable, environmentally friendly activities.

In conclusion, I grew up in the pleasant seaside environment in Williamstown where I gained a strong appreciation of the natural environment. My environmental interests broadened and I am now extremely concerned about the way in which Victoria's native forests are managed by VicForests. The organisation clearly has no regard for the legislation under which it operates as shown by its loss in the recent federal court case against it. The court case shows that VicForests' logging practices are a major threat to our native forests and the wildlife they contain. If these practices continue, the logging industry will destroy so much of Victoria's old growth native forest that it will destroy itself and the jobs the industry contends are so important to regional areas. Once that happens, there will also be an irreversible loss of native wildlife from those forests. It is time to reform the management of Victoria's old growth native forests, including providing more protection for them so they can continue to support the habitats of endangered species and also support jobs in tourism not logging.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/27/vicforests-breached-forestry-agreement-with-central-highlands-logging-court-rules>

¹⁰ <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/articles/victorian-governments-action-long-term-sustainability-victorias-native-timber-forests>