Independent Forestry Panel

Public submission

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Independent Forestry Panel Submission
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1. Sustainability of current and future forestry operations in NSW

The term 'sustainability' is contentious and political, however, to give it some continuity I'll use the definition of sustainability consistent with the Commonwealth forestry policy framework. Ecologically sustainable forest management (ESFM) contains three principles, they are:

a) to maintain the ecological process within forests;
b) to preserve forests biological diversity; and
c) to obtain for the community the full range of environmental, economic and social benefits from all forest uses within ecological limits.[1]

Whilst each of those principles is bulging with semantics beyond the scope of this submission, I'd like to acknowledge that 'ecological processes' is complex and I do not believe we have a thorough understanding of it because I know that we do not even have an understanding of soil microbiology. There are creatures in forests we have yet to identify. And these creatures are part of the ecological process.

Second, 'preserving forest biological diversity' is something only nature and indigenous people have successfully done. What our society has done is preserve a sense of superiority and domination over biological diversity and in that way we have come to ruin the diversity we once had. Take a flight in an aeroplane and you will see a patchwork of farmland devoid of diversity, where once there stood forest biological diversity.

Third, obtaining for 'the community the full range of environmental, economic and social benefits for all forest users' is a chortling with hubris. As a social scientist this term 'community' in this context is largely meaningless because 'the community' isn't some homogenous group. As a mindfulness practitioner I am currently prevented from walking in a large part of Bulga Forest because of forestry operations. As a photographer, I have been asked to move on because of currently forestry operations in Bulga Forest. Therefore, we can see exactly who benefits from the full range of forest resources.

Given these limitations I'd also suggest that a) and b) is in conflict with c). It is wishful thinking to suggest corporate capital can maintain an ecological process and preserve biological diversity when it can't even do this in society.

The best example of ESFM is from indigenous communities. How do we know this? Well, it's simple, before colonisation, there was an abundance of healthy forests. First Nations people here in Australia managed the landscape for 60,000 years and europeans found forests in abundance. The cedar getters made a lot of money felling trees. Today we use harvesters that fell one tree per minute. How many are we planting? How many species are we ensuring not only survive but thrive?

The assumption that we westerners, using a corporate capitalist model, can sustain forests by our management practices is foolish and naive and doesn't take account of history and reality. For example, the term 'forestry' essentially means the taking of timber. That timber does not have to be taken from forests per se, but forestry is a process of taking. It is based on a rights culture, rather than a culture of taking responsibility. There is a massive difference there.

[1] NSW Parliament. Legislative Council. Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Customer Service and Natural Resources. Report no. 54. *Long term sustainability and future of the timber and forest products industry*. September 2022. P 11.

As the 2022 Inquiry found, forestry in our society is devoid of contribution, of planning, of responsibility. If it were any different, we wouldn't find ourselves in a 'timber crisis.'

If true sustainability were a key goal, the forestry industry would have planned to make it sustainable by planting more trees than it planned to harvest. That's just good business practice. If I want to harvest food from our community garden, then we have to make sure we have good soil, good seeds, good germination and healthy and cultivation process. That's just good horticultural practice to ensure we have product to sell come harvest time.

We reap what we sow…

Some businesses manipulate the market by choking off supply in the face of rising demand so that prices and profits soar. If I'm the only grower of tomatoes and I reduce their supply in the face of a hungry population, I get more money for less work.

There's nothing new to this model of greedy business practice.

In terms of forestry, one way to do that is to delay increasing supply of timber. Something the 2022 Inquiry found had been happening over the past decades. The forestry industry has not cultivated plantations and thus have not tended to their gardens.

This seems quite negligent given timber is needed for housing and we also find ourselves within the midst of a housing crisis. Therefore, I'd submit that two key policies of the government have caused two separate but related crisis and by all accounts, I can't see them taking any responsibility toward rectification.

As a nomadic professional landscape photographer and a qualified and experienced horticulturalist, I have seen state forests that have appeared extremely well managed. Parts of the Yabbra State Forest for example, near Urbenville, is one example. Part of Yabbra is a native forest and is extremely beautiful with massive flooded gum trees growing amid palms. The contrast of the smooth white trunks with the deep green palms is delicious as morning mist swirls between the trees.

However, once you step out of your car and go for a walk, you start to see dumped fridges and sofa's left to rust and rot in the forest. Car tyres left and bags of rubbish dumped. You see inundations of lantana and other exotic species preventing movement of anyone larger than a rabbit. You also see that the only walking tracks are in fact tracks made by off road motorbikes that, over time, gouge deep ruts into the landscape and provide for rushing water and erosion in times of rain.

Indeed, like most state forests, the annual use of 1080 poison reduces its social benefit for people like me because my dog isn't safe to walk with

me in the forest. As the signage says: 1080 kills dogs. Likewise, its likely that the use of 1080 reduces biodiversity simply due to the fact that some native animals consume that poison… such as Australian possums[2] and the endangered spotted quoll.[3] Rather than tackle the societal neglect problem of dog dumping and dog breeding, the state's forest ecological diversity is being reduced by deliberately laid poison.

Is that what we call sustainable?

Part of that Yabbra state forest is also soft wood Pine plantation. Forest are usually places full of noises… bird calls in particular, maybe the sound of water on rocks in a river or creek. However, in a softwood plantation, which by nature is or should be a monoculture, such as the one near Urbenville, immersion into that forest is followed by silence. An eerie silence devoid of birds and diversity.

It's well established that monocultures are not sustainable, ecologically. They don't provide for a diversity of life forms, in or above the soil. However, where there is going to be mass destruction - harvesting - we don't want to encourage life. We don't want a myriad of life forms in a plantation because harvesting will cause suffering, mutilation or death. So this is perhaps one instance that monocultures should be encouraged but maybe on a better designed scale.

As you ca see in the photography above, the design of the Yabbra plantation isn't awesome and is likely not following ESFM. That plantation has created islands of native forest such that any species in those native areas are largely cut off and isolated from other species in other isolated patches. Like many diverse cultures, they are becoming isolates of history. Plantations should provide habitat corridors for wildlife to manoeuvre through a plantation without being in the actual monocultural crop. One thing about that plantation is that a thin wisp of native forest has largely been preserved along water ways.

However, the banks of Tooloom creek within Yabbra state forest is inundated with weed species such as privet and lantana. When kayaking there you can see that only species smaller than a rabbit can reach the water unless cattle have made larger tracks through the weeds. There are very few places a kayaker can go ashore there. One wouldn't want to get into trouble on the water. That can't be considered good for tourism or community amenity.

State forests should become more user friendly and people should be able to benefit from them. I agree.

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[2] <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/pests-and-threats/methods-of-control/1080/why-we-use-1080/> at 13 October 2024.

[3] <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/epbc/publications/significant-impact-guidelines-endangered-spot-tailed-quoll-dasyurus-maculatus-maculatus> at 13 October 2024 and <https://firetoflourish.monash/knowledge-centre/community-projects#tenterfield> at 13 October 2024.

For a month in 2023 I camped in that Yabbra softwood plantation. I had just held a photography exhibition in the town, I had produced a photography book on the local landscape, I had been on ABC radio and was engaged in photography for a number of new clients.

I was camped on top of a hill, flanked by a volcanic plug, commonly known as The Beehive. There were forestry workers present in or around the forest on a daily basis. One day I noticed smoke to the west. The next day the smoke increased in intensity and the wind was blowing it in my direction. I sent up my drone and found that the fire appeared to be on the western side of the state forest. From previous reconnaissance I knew there to be a bitumen road adjacent to a knoll housing an isolated native forest surrounded on 3 sides by the pine plantation.

It appeared to me that the wind might push the fire into the plantation. Despite there being forestry workers in the area I called 000 and reported the fire.

I was told the fire department were not aware of the fire and they immediately identified it as ‘out of control’ on the Hazards Near Me app. The fire was extinguished soon thereafter.

A few days later some forestry workers approached my campsite and asked me to leave.

I had been there for 28 days and I knew that state forests have a 28 day camping limit policy.

I asked them what happened with the fire. The forestry workers informed me that the fire had started on private property, had jumped the road and burned up and then down the knoll of native forest adjacent to the plantation and was extinguished just before it made its way into the plantation. We discussed the ramification of what a fire might do in a pine plantation and I informed the forestry workers that it was me who phoned in the fire.

After that I asked them if they still wanted me to leave…

They said yes, ‘you’ve been here 28 days’…

That seems like a rather silly policy to me. The good thing about intelligent humans is their use of discretion.

For starters I was actively promoting the area with my photography. I was actively engaged in tourism at no cost to the state. Second, why would you not give an exemption to someone who is actively looking out for and reporting hazards? After all a bushfire in a pine plantation would definitely reduce the supply of timber in NSW. They seemed more concerned that I might light a campfire despite the fact that I’m the person who puts others campfires out.

Most of the time communities are happy for me to camp in their forests because nomads like me pick up other peoples rubbish. We take responsibility when others don’t. We collect plastic and aluminium cans from waterways, we cut fishing line and hooks out of trees, and we extinguish campfires that others have left to smoulder.

This is normal and continual work for nomads living in nature.

Last summer I spent 6 weeks camped in the state forest adjacent to Blowing Dam near Tumut. By all appearances, that forest was largely burned in the 2019-20 bushfires and I noticed several things whilst there. I noticed that weeds were poorly managed. For example, there was an absolute abundance of flowering and fruiting blackberries. Whilst I love foraging for wild blackberries, their thorns aren't awesome for native animals and left unchecked, as they largely are in the native forest there near Talbingo (at the southern end of Blowering Dam), they create massive barriers impenetrable to any animals larger than rabbits.

And there were a lot of rabbits there…

Walking in the native areas of that state forest was largely impossible for the sheer blankets of blackberries. Thus, I think the third element of ESFM aren't being realised as the social benefit of access to that native forest was null and void. Likewise the community of macropods there seemed to struggle with the weed inundation making access for food and water troublesome.

That forest also has a large portion of land delegated to softwood plantation. In that part of the landscape I noticed several things, including:

a) Pine tree saplings inches tall were planted into what appears to be lifeless, degraded subsoil. Dirt like that has a lack of soil microbiology critical for the growth of plants. Thus, these saplings are likely to grow very slowly and poorly due to the lack of soil in the plantation. Given the current 'timber shortage crisis', poor horticultural practices like planting into dirt without providing compost and mulch, will not provide timber in the most efficient and effective way. To maximise tree growth the soil needs to be better cared for. And yes, that takes work and resources.

b) I also noticed timber waste and branch off cuts were poorly utilised. Timber off cuts are a source of carbon for future generations of microbes. They need carbon to grow and it is these microbes that enable the good growth of plants, including trees. That's why we use mulch in gardens. Mulch protects the soil, it keeps the temperature steady, it increases soil moisture and it provides a food source for the soil microbiome. As you can see behind me in this photo, the timber off cuts are just left as sticks willy nilly, thus contributing nothing to forestry and the cultivation of the young saplings there.

c) Often I found an abundance of timber off cuts that were lined up into piles. Strangely, given the steep topography of the landscape, these piles were not on contour and thus did not slow the flow of water down often steep mountains. When water hits the top of a mountain that has been cleared of flora, it tends to erode away the topsoil and end up in the valley or in the body of water beneath. Enabling this type of erosion is typically called 'poor land management'. In this case, the erosion ends up in Blowing Dam. I wonder how much glyphosate is now in Blowing Dam? It's a tourism hotspot for water skiers.

Here is an image that show large lines of timber debris, up to 1 metre tall, essentially helping water to quickly runoff. The sustainable way to manage water on slopes is to slow it down. Thus, a better approach, apart from using the off cuts as a mulch, would be to line the debris up 'on contour' to slow the water down and thus reduce erosion.

d) There were signs up in the state forest stating that the blackberries were being sprayed with glyphosate and thus 'do not eat fruit!' I wonder how many animals and birds could read those signs? I also wonder why it is that forestry is actively creating glyphosate resistant black berries?

Glyphosate resistance in plants is a growing global problem and one way of increasing resistance is to spray them when they are flowering and fruiting. That way some of the seed adapts to the poison and becomes resistant. Likewise, spraying these fruiting plants reduces people's accessibility to them. I was fortunate whilst I was there to identify plants that hadn't been sprayed but over Christmas there were thousands of campers camped on Blowering Dam, most of whom didn't experience the luxury of foraging and feasting on wild black berries.

I would have thought that enabling a tourism based business to harvest the blackberries would have been more sustainable than spraying them. Initiative is what's lacking there.

I'd like to make a few more points. According to the Australian Forest Products Association, native forests provide forestry operations with hardwoods that take up to 60 years to regrow.[4]. The NSW Forestry Corporation has stated that in "native forests, one per cent of trees are harvested each year."[5] If both of these are true, then in 10 years, 10% of a native forest is harvested and in 50 years, 50% is harvested. How is that sustainable?

By the time natural regrowth has occurred (60 years), 60% of the forest has been harvested. In two cycles, eg 120 years, 120% of the forest has been harvested. This is basic mathematics. The current system is unsustainable.

Let's look at it another way.

[4] 2022 Inquiry report, above n 1, p 5.

[5] 2022 Inquiry report above n 1, p 19.

Old growth forests provide homes for many critters in the forest. Most of us agree that those critters deserve to live. Of course, just like humans, critters need more than homes to survive and thrive, but let's just limit this argument to homes provided in old growth forests.

We know that many trees take 100 years and more to create hollows aka homes. How are non-old growth trees able to become old growth trees if in 100 years 100% of the trees are harvested? True it is that today forestry is precluded from harvesting trees over a certain size but how are young trees to get to that size if they're all getting cut? A young tree can't get to 100 with todays unsustainable forestry management practices.

That's not sustainable. That's not managing the forest in a biologically diverse manner and it certainly isn't managing a forest for all community groups.

Therefore, its not only common sense that tells me but mathematics also suggests that native forest logging is unsustainable by definition and must stop. It is not enough that industry voices are screaming that they need another 50 years to plan. It is industry that has been silencing the voices of scientists for decades. As the 2022 inquiry states: the time is now.[6]

Let's talk business for a minute.

When is the best time to invest in the stock market?

Now.

Why?

Because generally the market increases over time. Prices go up and that's why we invest. The power of compounding increases our investment.

The same thing happens with nature.

When is the best time to invest in tree plantations?

Now.

It is time to invest in plantations.

Yes, it would have been more prudent to invest 20 years ago. I too am kicking myself that I didn't invest 20 years ago so the NSW government shouldn't feel alone in missing the boat! But it's not too late. The boat's still there. Now is better than never. Unless of course we don't care.

Likewise, with any business venture, it is irrelevant that the government and industry have a massive capital investment to get these things started now we are almost 25 years into the new millennium. If we need to supply timber we have to invest.

If we want to harvest apples, we need to plant apple trees. This is not rocket science.

Had they started in the 1990's, when land and resources were cheaper, we would have harvestable plantations in abundance and we would be leading the world. Instead, industry lobbied against plantations, and climate change and so many other things preferring the cheaper option of logging native forests, clearing land and destroying habitat and taking species to the brink of oblivion. The fact that key players didn't invest early means they have to invest late. That means they pay more. It's simple economics. But we shouldn't do what Chomsky[7] predicts we'd do. We shouldn't make the taxpayer pay whilst private industry profits.

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[6] Above n 1, p 38.

[7] Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffle, (eds), (2002), *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky.* The New Press, New York.

2. Environmental and cultural values of forests, including threatened species and Aboriginal cultural heritage values

Forests hold inherent value beyond what they provide for humans. They form habitat for many species of animals, birds and insects. They slow water and enable water to penetrate the earth thereby reducing issues downstream and recharging underwater aquifers. Forests are cooler places. Compared to open grasslands, forests provide a cooler place to be with lower temperatures compared to non-forested areas.

A lot of biodiversity thrives in healthy forests. When native forests are logged, that diversity reduces. For example, NSW Forestry is currently attempting to harvest trees from Bulga Forest. Bulga Forest is home to a number of threatened species including the Greater Glider (*Petauroides volans*). This gorgeous nocturnal creature is listed as Endangered at the Commonwealth level and there is no Recovery Plan and the Cth website states: "Recovery Plan required, stopping decline and supporting recovery is complex, due to the requirement for a high level of planning to abate the threats, a high level of support by key stakeholders, a high level of prioritisation and a highly adaptive management process. Existing mechanisms are not adequate to address these needs (2/5/2016)."[8] The key threats to the Greater Glider is native forest timber harvesting, land clearing, fires and climate change.[9]

It's interesting to think back to what governments did in 2020 to reduce the key threats to humans regarding Covid 19. We closed businesses, we subsidised the Harvey Norman's of the world yet we can't seem to stop destroying habitat.

The Greater Glider is also listed as Endangered in the ACT, NSW, Qld and Victoria after being listed in all those states as vulnerable just one and two years ago. Thus the threat level to this create has been recently elevated. The key threatening process are the same as for most species, land clearing and habitat destruction.

The same follows for the koala that also finds home in Bulga Forest. Stop destroying habitat and we stop the extinction crisis. It's pretty simple really but forests aren't just habitat for these creatures. They're also where I call home.

I have lived in many forests. Most forests I have lived in are in riparian areas by rivers and creeks. For me these forests enable me to live as a nomad, simply and in harmony with nature. In these forests I utilise fresh water from rainfall for drinking and river and creek water for washing and bathing. In forests I can best practice mindfulness and Zen Buddhism.

Two and a half thousand years ago the Buddha became enlightened at the foot of a large tree in a forest and thereafter he taught mostly in forests. Forests to Buddhists are like churches to Christians. In forests we can see clearly the interconnectedness of all beings. That is one central teachings of the Buddha. We are not separate from anything in our world, we can never be by ourselves alone.

Likewise, it is Buddhist practice to see ourselves in what is often perceived as the other. In Buddhism we see plants as secondary lungs. In science we know that what we breath in, plants have breathed out. Therefore, plants are more who we are, than who we are not.

In a riparian forest we can meditate upon the flowing steam and reflect on the nature of consciousness. It is a Buddhist teaching that we can never enter the same river twice and that consciousness is like a flowing river.

When these forests are ruined or trashed, we are trashed.

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[8] <https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=254> at 13 October 2024.

[9] <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/254-conservation-advice-05072022.pdf> at 134 October 2024.

Native forests are home to many species. Some of these species are listed as threatened because of key threatening processes such as land clearing and habitat destruction. I also call many native forests home. I currently live near the Bulga Forest and I've seen the initial impacts of forestry there. My right to camp there has been temporarily revoked because of harvesting operations in the area. I identified a campsite several kilometres from the harvesting area but still, it currently constitutes an offence to camp there.

Likewise, my ability to stop the car and take photographs has been terminated because forestry has cordoned off a section of the forest and made it an offence to be there. Vehicles can drive through, but it's an offence to stop. Talk about social control.

The forest is our one last refuge from such domination and control. Many of us go to forests to reconnect and recharge. Forest bathing is an ancient form of healing I have briefly written about in my latest book 'Root of the Matter: Cultivating Soul and Soil Through Mindful Gardening'. How are we to practice these things if it is an offence to stop?

How can I run photography workshops if its an office to stop?

It is, quite simply, not good enough.

3. Demand for timber products, particularly as relates to NSW housing, construction, mining, transport and retail

I am not an exert in this field but I understand that our consumer society is being increasingly bombarded with ongoing messaging relevant to more, more, more. And very few people are becoming happier, happier, happier.

Decades of Commonwealth laws relevant to negative gearing and capital gains tax has seen the housing market sky rocket because people can buy residential housing as a tax deduction leaving others without adequate housing. Housing is a basic necessity and should be exempt from negative gearing policies.

Technologies like Air BNB are enabling investors to maximise their rental income for much less work further reducing housing availability. We need to regulate the commodification of housing.

Choking supply increases demand and prices.

Construction is the same, regional areas are falling well short of quality trades people often waiting for over a year for basic construction work. Many are being completely ripped off with little recourse but to pay exorbitant fees.

There appears to be growing demand for these things but much of the demand is artificial and created by government policy.

4. The future of softwood and hardwood plantations and the continuation of Private Native Forestry in helping meet timber supply needs

There is only one future and that is softwood and hardwood plantations. Even if native forestry continues, and it shouldn't, the future for it is bleak. There is very little native forest left and those that are left are the few refuges of threatened species.

Plantations need to be invested in and industry and government needs to kick the tin. The fact they we haven't got a thriving timber industry is because key players in the industry have failed to invest.

If as the Inquiry report found,[10] industry and government is shirking away from increasing the quantity of plantations because of the price of land. Inflation is a problem we all face and we know

[10] Above n 1.

that investing in assets like real estate will pay off in the future. That is precisely why real estate is featured in any balanced portfolio.

Of course another option is to identify cleared land to lease. Increase the public and private partnerships and utilise some of the degraded and cleared land that occupies the vast majority of the Australian continent.

We do not need as many cattle and sheep as we need trees. There's the trade off. Less cattle and sheep more trees.

I believe private native forestry has all the problems associated with public native forestry… it causes death and suffering, extinction and ecological collapse. Native forests should be excluded from forestry operations. They've been degraded, cleared and chopped up for long enough. Time for real change please.

5. The role of State Forests in maximising the delivery of a range of environmental, economic and social outcomes and options for diverse management, including Aboriginal forest management models.

I don't believe NSW Forestry Corporation has the competence or the cultural sensitivity to implement diverse management. By definition, a corporation has the core function to maximise profits. If state forestry was managed in a more diverse manner, by a structure that is not a corporation, but a cooperative, then maybe…

6. Opportunities to realise carbon and biodiversity benefits and support carbon and biodiversity markets, and mitigate and adapt to climate change risks, including the greenhouse gas emission impacts of different uses of forests and assessment of climate change risks to forests.

As soon as we plant something in the ground soil microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, micro arthropods etc) start to migrate into the root zone of the plant. This is the area most populated by soil microorganisms. Soil microorganisms bodies are made largely of carbon. This is precisely why we add 3:1 carbon:nitrogen to produce compost. Without the carbon we don't see decomposition at anywhere near the rate. Once upon a time I routinely looked at compost under a compound microscope and the sheer abundance of life per drop of diluted soil was astounding. By far, good compost was made up mostly of living organisms. And you could clearly tell the difference between soil particles, flora and microbes.

Trillions of microorganisms can be present in a teaspoon of soil. In dirt, there's hardly any microbes at all. And that is the key difference between dirt and soil. Of course the logical conclusion is that good soil is mostly made of carbon. I have spent the last decade teaching people how to create soil from dirt and this is covered in my new book: Root of the Matter: Cultivating Soul and Soil Through Mindful Gardening.

When we take trees and plants from a forest we reduce the carbon in that forest. This includes the carbon stored in the trees and the carbon making up the bodies of the trillions of creatures living in the root zones of the trees.

We can see this under a microscope. When we kill plants we also kill the microorganisms in the root zone. Why? Because there is a symbiotic relationship between plants and microbes. It has

existed for eons. I also write about this in my book. Moreover, when we cut down plants and the microbes die, guess where the carbon goes? That carbon releases into the atmosphere… It's the same phenomena that happens when we till the soil.. we release carbon into the atmosphere.

Likewise when heavy machinery is driven into a forest, its wheel tracks compact the soil. That crushes soil microbes. It causes areas of anaerobic activity and it reduces water infiltration. This is precisely why some local councils and event coordinators are stopping vehicles from driving on lawns.