Independent Forestry Panel

Public submission

JOHN BLAY		**Submission ID:** 204755
Organisation:	*N/A*	
Location:	*New South Wales*	
Supporting materials uploaded:	*Attached overleaf*	

Submission date: 10/13/2024 11:08:20 AM

Places of the Greater Glider

Since 1982 I've walked and camped in the continuous forests of the coastal ranges from Tallaganda, near Braidwood, to below the Victorian Border. One of the great delights of my life is to lie on my back at sundown and experience the changing life of the forest above. Soon comes the first thump, perhaps with a rattle of bark, then another and another as the greater gliders soar from tree to tree, sometimes over great distances, floating up there, silent, seemingly lighter than the air. It's a wondrous experience to be present and follow such magical creatures tracing invisible roads high up through the tall forests. They're interested, curious, and yet keep well above the day to day squabblings and battles of the earth-bound crazies like me. They become more obvious when you spotlight them by the shine of their eyes but mostly I prefer to spotlight only with care and restraint and not be too intrusive in their rarefied world.

Of the many places all along the escarpment of the coastal ranges where I've had such experiences, there's one I keep coming back to, a simple researchers' camp near Waratah Creek in the deep, dark forests of the Coolangubra. During the 1980s it was found to have the highest population of arboreal mammals in the world, especially mountain brushtails and the gentler greater gliders, but it wasn't just the possums I kept coming back for (as I attempted to explain in my 2020 book, *Wild Nature*) I returned time and again over more than forty years for reasons that were complex. I could watch possums by night and come morning the birdcalls seem amplified. Their dawn chorus is far too loud and insistent to sleep through. I might examine one of many gardens of native orchids and after breakfast wander down the creek to look at the extraordinary daytime community of the waratahs. The Gippsland or tree waratah, *Telopea Oreades* is quite common hereabouts in the damper gullies. At times they are insignificant and yet in their season they stand out in the gloom as if competing in a red light district. When the flower first opens it looks majestic and being less complex than the Sydney Waratah the parts are more obvious and spider-like. From one year to another the flower size and numbers can vary. In this heavily canopied forest the light changes subtly, as does the glow of the flowers. Their flashes can surround you like wildfires on a mountain. Any shards of sunlight cut through too brightly and wash out the subtleties. At times there is a halo miasma around the trees caused by the intensity of insect life attracted to the sweetness of the flowers; some insects are so tiny as to be visible only when the clouds of them are lit. One moth hovers, others strike at eccentric speeds, the native bees, wasps. All love the warmer morning air. As the heat increases, so do the insect numbers, until the dews dry and it gets hotter and just about all retire for a siesta. In the night-time I walk backwards and forwards along the creek with a spotlight looking for possums above the waratah trees in the higher canopy, and there are so many it seems to prove the value of the protections afforded by national park status. They are

remarkably beautiful in fine black and white colouring and placid in their maturity. I've had them look at me eye to eye, curious, calm, not unfriendly, but different. And in the warmer weather I've often seen the amazing sight of young ones, creamy white, searching the forest floor by day for a new home after being dismissed from the family den.

These splendid tall forests of mostly peppermint, brownbarrel, swamp, mountain, grey and ribbony gum generally have a grassy understorey on the flats above the creeklines. The area was logged by forestry in various ways during the 1980s but in years to come later in the 2000s, I spot fewer and fewer possums, where before there had been gliders in every second tall tree. That their numbers might drop so alarmingly would be due to the loss of old-growth trees where they can make their dens and also easier hunting for powerful owls.

Soon after the Black Summer fires of 2019-20 I return to see what damage has come to pass. My old campsite is only lightly burnt even though the surrounding forests are clearly affected by the terribly dry weather that preceded the fires. But along the Coolangubra Forest Way, the route used by log trucks through this part of South East Forests National Park, the forests have been ravaged by bulldozing. I had an inkling after hearing a logging contractor speak on local ABC about how he had put in a fire break that would protect Bombala for the next fifty years. He's one of those subsequently (unsuccessfully) bidding for salvage logging rights in the burnt national park. The bulldozing has made a sixty metre wide clearing of huge old trees pushed back into the otherwise healthy old-growth forest. The bulldozers continued through the ferny creek and young waratahs. The western side of the road has been more heavily burnt in fire hazard reduction, severely affecting the canopy. The old waratahs and ferns along the creek are blackened but a few green shoots are beginning to appear.

The many hundreds of glider dens and potential dens were lost here in these fires, in state forests and national parks, and clearing of the possums' roads and channels of communication and socialisation through the previously continuous forest seemed a terrible disgrace that would surely see the offenders brought to justice. These were the heartlands of the gliders' place, ravaged not only by fires but also deliberate bulldozing.

The area was burnt during the summer emergency, and my visit revealed the extent of damage to fern and waratah glades west of the road, which was deliberately lit, I understand, as a way of protecting the forestry plantations closer to Bombala. But the damage to the national park either side of the forest way might take fifty or a hundred years to recover, if that is possible. My spotlighting reveals no animals.

Bulldozers had again passed along the roadside only a week or so back, perhaps to deliberately reinforce the damage done. Are there people seeking to degrade our protected lands for ulterior reasons? Is opposition to national park values entrenched?

I’m deeply shocked at these signs of disrespect, in the face of the rapid loss of glider population in these forests. Are they on their way out, another species we are allowing to fade away in the face of climate emergency? The plantations of the Bombala region will have a growing economic importance over the years to come but that is not to excuse deliberately damaging natural values of nearby national parks and their endangered species. The greater gliders have a unique place in the SE forest ecosystems and it is essential we take measures to publicise and show respect for the tall forest homelands of this remarkable but extremely vulnerable species.

The state forests between Tallaganda and the border should be made national park if for no other reason than to protect the rapidly diminishing numbers of greater gliders. The disrespect for protected lands should be squashed immediately. The way to do it is to put an end to the competition between state forests and national parks, and speculation that parks might one day be returned to forestry management. Therefore I call upon the state government to immediately convert the tall forest sections of Tallaganda, Badja, Dampier (higher parts), Glenbog, Tantanwangalo, Cathcart, Coolangubra, Nalbaugh and Bondi State Forests to national park. Each has significant but decreasing populations of the endangered greater gliders. But also, there are other far more endangered animals in these forests, including koalas and long footed potoroos. Enhanced management should ensure contractors abide by park regulations and have no free licence to destroy wildlife values.

The only other option, to end the increasingly complicated need for effective management, would be to end native forest logging throughout NSW.

The gliders have an important role in Aboriginal lore and there are many Aboriginal places and scarred trees throughout this country in the State Forests. National park management and cultural burning practices, should couple with the local Aboriginal land councils to ensure the important values are preserved.

-John Blay

Post fire recovery and roadside clearing at Waratah Creek. Photo by John Blay.