

Good afternoon,

To introduce myself, I have had 43 years experience in the forestry industry, now retired. The last 16 of those years were spent managing environmental resources for a private plantation forestry company in Gippsland. I have written prescriptions and overseen the management of threatened species under advice from DELWP and other experts, set up koala management and monitoring programs across a huge estate which includes 30,000ha of protected native habitat, undertaken a range of environmental restoration projects in partnership with many government and non-government organizations and built up a huge knowledge base about the Strzelecki Ranges and South Gippsland from my lifetime of living and working in the area.

I am trying to understand the reasoning behind Vic Forests' decision to undertake harvest thinning in the Alberton West State Forest, especially at this point in time, from a logical and scientific perspective. I have had a long association with the area and was actively involved in the massive effort by Yarram Yarram Landcare Network and the Jack and Albert River Restoration (JARR) committee, through which millions of both Federal and State Government dollars, as well as significant contributions from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation, were combined with land donation and great effort from local land owners to restore and promote environmental sustainability in the area.

The main drivers behind this work were 1) protecting water quality in the internationally significant RAMSAR listed wetlands including the unique seagrass meadows and fish resources of Nooramunga/Corner Inlet, for which this area is the catchment and 2) preserving habitat and restoring connectivity between core areas and remnants such as Alberton West State Forest for the general purpose of maintaining biodiversity, but specifically for species such as the Strzelecki Koala which we now know from intensive genetic research is critical for the survival of koalas throughout Australia.

A couple of points about this harvesting really concern me:

- The timing of it, considering that an ecological burn was conducted through about half of the available habitat area last autumn. I am PRO ecological burning. I understand the science behind it and know that an appropriate fire regime is necessary to maintain biodiversity in the long term. However, it is a disturbance event that has an immediate to medium term impact on flora and fauna which can take from months to years to return to equilibrium and the effects on some species are greater than others. The fire was hot enough to brown the crowns of the trees which have not yet greened up, which means that any surviving koalas have been displaced into unburnt areas and have to remain there for some time. Their refuge area is now at risk from harvesting activity. Koalas in a natural wild population are territorial and being displaced from their home territories into those occupied by other koalas causes significant stress, sometimes conflict and occasionally mortality, over and above the stress caused by the disturbance itself and/or loss of their preferred food supply. Creating a second impact to these animals within such a short period is very poor planning and could have serious consequences.
- Still on the subject of koalas, we all know what a terrible hit they have taken right up the east coast of Australia from the 2019 fires. Koalas in NSW and Qld were already in decline and are now considered to be at risk of extinction. The koalas we have in the Strzelecki Ranges and South Gippsland constitute the only remaining wild and genetically diverse population remaining in Victoria and as such are critically important for the survival of the entire species. This has now been well accepted and understood throughout the scientific community, following brilliant genetics research undertaken in recent years. The company I worked for supported that research in financial and practical ways and I fully understand the implications. The most concerning issue is that without outlying remnant habitat/refuge areas

like Alberton West State Forest and corridors that connect them with the core population areas in the Strzelecki Ranges, we have all our eggs in one basket. I estimate, based on extensive habitat maps and population monitoring results available to me, that as much as 40% of our koalas were killed in one day during the Black Saturday fire in 2009. Yet that was not our most intense drought season in this area within the last 20 years, by far. It is easy to visualise a situation in which a fire on the scale of the 2019 event in East Gippsland could sweep through most or all of what is the relatively confined habitat range of these precious animals, decimating the entire population. In that scenario, having outlying remnant forest areas like Alberton West, with a small but healthy population of animals that have a chance of surviving, is absolutely critical for the eventual repopulation of core areas and preservation of the gene pool. We should be doing all we can to promote and protect the welfare of these animals, not causing them unnecessary disturbance and risk.

- The lack of transparency and conflicting information around the management of threatened species on the site is a major concern. One such concern is Powerful Owl, considering that it is currently breeding season and there are records of this species close to the coupe that is now being harvested. Any disturbance from noise or machinery within 200-300m of a nest tree can cause abandonment of the nest and death of the young, yet the records are much closer than that. Initial information provided by Vic Forests was that a ground survey had been done, which I know from personal experience is completely inadequate because it is like looking for a needle in a haystack and has a very small likelihood of detecting a nest tree due to the necessarily broad search area and experience/skills required by observers. Then the official coupe planning information that I saw yesterday said simply that a call playback survey had been conducted. This would have had to be done over several months prior to the breeding season to be both safe (for the birds' breeding) and effective and is a specialized survey technique that would have needed to be done by a professional consultant (zoologist). The results of any professional survey would have necessarily come with a report detailing the survey strategy, timing, locations and findings, yet no report has been seen by anyone in contact with or requesting information from Vic Forests or DELWP at this point. Now I hear that a Powerful Owl was seen yesterday leaving the active coupe area. Most likely the damage is already done, which is tragic.
- Isolated remnants like Alberton West are inherently vulnerable because of their finite size and isolation. All species require a minimum area of available habitat to maintain viable populations and genetic diversity. The risk posed by any unnecessary disturbance is therefore greatly magnified, compared to similar disturbances in landscape-scale forests. At the same time native vegetation is so depleted in South Gippsland, with around 15% of the Strzelecki Ranges Bioregion in reserve. Why are we even considering this?
- Nobody seems to have considered the multiple risks involved from this harvesting activity or weighed them up against the short term benefit of extracting some low value pulpwood. Nor has there been any consideration for the efforts and genuine concerns of local landowners, who have made personal sacrifices over many years to see the unique environmental values in their area restored and preserved. In fact from my observation so far, there has been a determination from Vic Forests to get in there and do it no matter what the objections and as a matter of urgency before it can be stopped. So much for community consultation and due process.

I request your urgent attention to this matter, as work has already started in the first coupe and is progressing at an accelerated rate.

Yours sincerely,  
Richard Appleton