



## **Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA)**

### **Position on the proposed 'Great Forest National Park'**

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the professional body representing over 1,000 members who are forest scientists and managers operating in all aspects of forest and natural resource management, including forest conservation throughout Australia.

Foresters, informed by the science of natural resource management, play a crucial role in shaping the future of forests. The IFA promotes a dialogue that is inclusive and encourages positive thinking about the future. Foresters care for forests. We want to promote creative, design-led, innovative solutions that balance our future needs for sustainable forest management, timber supply, and conservation outcomes.

The IFA position is that the current mix of public land tenures in the Victorian Central Highlands allows a good balance between conservation and other (multiple) land uses. There is no need to create a 'Great Forest National Park'.

Creation of the proposed Great Forest National Park is not supported because:

- A national park is not necessary. The proposed values and benefits can all be met from creative management within the existing land tenures.
- Proposed benefits are dependent on additional government investment. These investments can occur without creating a new national park.
- The proposal will significantly reduce timber supply and have a significant impact on the region's timber industry.
- This region is prone to large scale and destructive bushfires. Irrespective of land tenure, investment in intensive bushfire management will be required to minimise the consequences from future fires.
- The proposal for a national park has not demonstrated that it optimises the public benefit outcomes for all Victorians.

The IFA believes that the creation of a national park should be supported by the majority of Victorians and based on a clear public benefit. This is not the case with the proposal to create a Great Forest National Park.

A range of points have been put forward in the debate about the creation of a 'Great Forest National Park'. The response of the IFA<sup>1</sup> to these points is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> With references to published research and public documents

## **Bushfire Management:**

**The IFA position: Irrespective of land tenure, investment in bushfire management capability needs to be increased to meet the increased risk of bushfire from the effects of climate change.**

- This region is prone to large scale and destructive bushfires. Bushfire frequency and intensity is set to increase with a changing climate.
- Investment in bushfire management will be required to protect this resource and to minimise the consequences from future fires.
- This will require intensive fire management. This can be achieved through new and improved forestry practices, ensuring access, and investing in fire management technology and capability development.
- Bushfire management needs to be considered at a landscape level and be inclusive of all land tenures, including private land.

## **Leadbeater's Possum:**

**The IFA position: Existing measures to conserve Leadbeater's Possum are adequate. An independent review of the conservation status of Leadbeater's Possum and mountain ash is required.**

- The Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) assessment of the conservation status of Leadbeater's possum is flawed. A paper concluding this has been prepared and will be submitted to the Threatened Species Scientific Committee.
- Since May 2015, when the Leadbeater's Possum was listed as 'Critically Endangered', there has been a major research effort into better understanding its population and habitat. As well, some highly innovative and successful habitat creation methods have developed and implemented, and forest management practices have been adapted to ensure that timber harvesting doesn't impact on this species.
- Around 70% of the region's Mountain Ash forest that is already ideal or potential Leadbeater's Possum habitat, is already reserved in three national parks, closed water supply catchments, and various State forest reserves where timber harvesting is excluded (LPAG 2014).
- Leadbeater's possum is thriving in the current mix of land tenures. This includes in logging regrowth as young as 10-20 years, and fire regrowth only 7 years old (DELWP 2016).
- In 2014, its population was estimated at up to 11,000 individuals (LPAG 2014). A new survey methodology, introduced in early 2015, led to the confirmed discovery of 354 new possum colonies in the 18 months to September 2016 (DELWP 2016) and 556 possum colonies by February 2017 (VicForests 2017). This dwarfs the previous average detection rate of less than 10 new colonies per year from 1998 to 2014.
- The pre-harvest detection and full protection of all known possum colony sites in State Forest wood production zones ensures that timber harvesting has no impact on its current population.

- Since 2014, active conservation management, jointly funded and facilitated by VicForests and DELWP, has been successfully supplementing Leadbeater's Possum habitat. As of late 2016, 51% of 72 artificially-created hollows were occupied by the possum, while 53% of 493 nest boxes were showing signs of occupancy (DELWP 2016). This innovation is even more significant when considering hollows take about 200 years to develop in trees and bushfires may limit attainment of these ages.

#### **Biodiversity:**

**The IFA position: The GFNP is unlikely to provide any clear additional benefit to biodiversity.**

- Claims that past timber harvesting is primarily responsible for the lack of old growth forest in the region are not evidence-based. The lack of old growth forest is overwhelmingly due to bushfires (particularly in 1926 and 1939) which, in combination, killed some 75-80% of the forest (LCC 1991). The 2009 'Black Saturday' fires killed the largest remaining areas of old growth forests (in Melbourne's water catchments).
- There has been no harvesting of 'old growth' forest in the Central Highland's forests for around 30 years.
- Some ecological studies show that a diverse forest with a mosaic of different age classes (produced by a cycle of harvesting and regeneration) interspersed with unharvested forests, supports a greater range of biodiversity than 'locked-up' forests (e.g. Ryan 2013, O'Neill 2004).
- By closing the timber industry, the creation of the GFNP would result in the loss of fire-fighting expertise of a skilled forestry work force.
- With the onset of a hotter and drier climate, there is a risk of more large bushfires and thus more severe damage to biodiversity (DPI 2013).

#### **Plantations:**

**The IFA position: Plantations for hardwood log supply will require a long term strategy and investment. Discussion on this strategy needs to be led by government.**

- Commercial volumes of high value mountain ash and alpine ash timber cannot currently be obtained from the very limited area of eucalypt plantations, almost none of which is mature.
- The creation of a GFNP would lock up most of the region's timber resource, resulting in the decimation of much of the region's high value timber industry.
- Our timber needs have to come from somewhere. If the GFNP was created, the ongoing demand for high quality hardwood timber would drive substantially increased imports of tropical rainforest timbers from the Asia-Pacific region (Flanagan 2011). Ecological and socially sustainable forest management in many of these Asia-Pacific countries still has a long way to go to meet Australian forest management and harvesting standards.
- A recent nation-wide survey found widespread community support for timber industries with 81% of Australians seeing no harm in cutting down trees to produce wood, as long as the forests are regrown (FWPA 2016).

- A future long term timber supply strategy needs to be considered on a landscape scale. This includes business models for the co-production of exiting timber resources on private land and establishing new plantations on suitable private land.

#### **Tourism employment:**

**The IFA position: Tourism will not compensate for the loss of jobs and economic activity generated in forest management and the timber industry.**

- The native forest timber industry in the Central Highlands region generates \$573 million of economic activity/year, including \$357 million in GRP added to the Victorian economy. This does not even include the downstream manufacturing and processing that is linked to the industry. The industry directly employs 2,117 workers, including 1100 in the already disadvantaged Latrobe Valley region (Deloitte Access Economics 2015). The closure of this industry as a result of the creation of a huge new national park would be a socio-economic disaster for the Gippsland community.
- The claim that this socio-economic loss would be recouped by increased forest-based eco-tourism is not supported by relevant evidence. A recent report commissioned by 'environment groups' based its findings of a supposed tourism boom on experiences in the Grampians and Mallee where national parks were established 40-years ago and there was no prior timber industry (Morton and Gordon 2017). In far more pertinent and recent examples, such as the Otways and the Murray Valley forests, there is no evidence that new national parks have generated sufficient jobs to replace those lost by closing the former forest and timber industries.
- Some advocate eco-tourism as a socio-economic replacement for timber industries, yet are invariably strongly opposed to tourism developments proposed for national parks (Shannon 2015). They typically support only free of charge bushwalking which comes nowhere near delivering the socio-economic benefits lost by the closure of timber industries and restrictions on public uses such as camping, dog-walking, hunting, prospecting, firewood collecting, etc.
- The Central Highlands region already supports a vibrant tourism sector that operates within and outside the forests and has co-existed for decades alongside the timber industry. However, forest-based tourism is very seasonal given that the forests are cold, wet, and uninviting for at least the winter months.
- Tourism, in-part, relies on the road network built and maintained to service the timber industry. Without the timber industry, the road network would deteriorate thereby reducing tourist access.
- The timber industry offers mostly skilled and full-time jobs whereas the tourism and the related hospitality sectors generally offer only seasonal or part-time unskilled work.

#### **Water supply:**

**The IFA position: Creation of a national park will have no discernible difference to water supply.**

- Most (88%) of the 157,000 ha of Melbourne's water supply catchments is already permanently closed to human access, including timber harvesting (MBAC Consulting 2006).
- Claims that the GFNP would drastically improve Melbourne's water supply are at odds with the reality that the quality of Melbourne's drinking water is already amongst the world's top

five major city supplies. This is despite decades of limited harvesting in the 12% of the area that is available for that purpose (Priestley 2003).

- Only around 200 ha (0.13%) of the catchment area is harvested each year. Several past studies have shown that this has a negligible effect on the quality and quantity of water stored in the catchment dams (e.g. SKM 2006, Battad *et al* 2007).

#### **Carbon emissions:**

#### **The IFA position: The GFNP would not reduce carbon emissions:**

- The claim that declaring the GFNP will 'save' carbon ignores the implications of no longer producing our own wood products. The 'substitution effect' would result in Australia needing to import replacement wood products or turning to non-wood alternatives such as steel or concrete with substantially greater carbon footprints (Ximenes *et al* 2016).
- After taking account of the 'substitution effect', a cycle of harvest and regeneration will, over the longer term, build-up carbon stores in the community and is a superior forest carbon strategy compared to unmanaged/unused forests (IPCC 2007).
- Wood is the only building material that is both renewable and stores carbon and so there should be more of it commercially available, rather than less. If forest harvesting is sustainably managed, wood supply should be carbon neutral.
- Claims about saving forest carbon are largely related to the use of wood to make printing and copy paper. This is incorrectly regarded by environmental campaigners as virtually an instant carbon emission. In reality, carbon in around 50% of paper products is recycled, and much is stored longer term in various products, while paper products disposed of in land-fill can store carbon for decades (CRC for Greenhouse Accounting 2006).
- Due to the prevalence of bushfires, Victorian forests are not permanent carbon stores, despite environmentalists' claims to the contrary.

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**For more information - contact the Institute of Foresters of Australia: [admin@forestry.org.au](mailto:admin@forestry.org.au)**

**IFA - representing Australia's forest science community since 1935. [www.forestry.org.au](http://www.forestry.org.au)**

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