

Plantation Strzelecki Ranges

the Forest debate



One year old plantation Strzelecki Ranges



Newly harvested with buffers remaining Strzelecki Ranges



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Debate over setting aside more of the Strzeleckis as reserve has raged for years. In this edition of LINK we look at some of the issues and a proposal that looks set to be the solution.

How much of the Strzeleckis should be reserved?

Friends of the Earth, Environment Victoria, Victorian National Parks Association, Wilderness Society, Field Naturalist Club of Victoria, Gippsland Local Government Network, Friends of the Gippsland Bush, Society for Growing Australian Plants, South Gippsland Conservation Society, Friends of Tarra-Bulga National Park, Mt. Best Concerned Residents Association, Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists, Strzelecki Hills and Wonthaggi/Bass branches of the ALP, Prom Coast Tourism, Professor David Bellamy and the Australian Greens (Victoria) have all expressed their support for a greater reserve system in the Strzeleckis.

In 1998, some South Gippslanders proposed a way to enlarge the reserve system to 30,000 ha. bringing the proportion of land in reserve to a much healthier 10% of total bioregion, bringing existing reserves (5000 ha.) together with the non-leased areas of State Forest (5000 ha.) and almost half of the leased public land (20,000 ha.). The national park would have linked the forest from Turtons Creek in the west to beyond Tarra-Bulga Park in the east, as well as including outlying but significant areas. The Proposal struck a strong note in the Gippsland community with 7000 people signing a petition in support of it in no time at all. Support among conservationists was remarkably broad and enthusiastic.

Arguments against, that locking up so much of the forest would lead to a loss of jobs, probably became secondary to the argument that the timber to support the Paperlinx mill at Maryvale would need to come from somewhere, and by 'locking up' so much of the Strzeleckis, attention would turn to harvesting equally or more important areas of the Central Highlands.

While there has been ongoing debate over how much reserve is too much or too little, there is a glimmer of hope that a workable solution to protect key areas of biodiversity can be found through a proposal called 'Cores and Links'.

The Strzelecki Working Group (SWG) formed by the South Gippsland Shire, with conservation groups, Hancock Victoria Plantations and municipal representatives, commissioned the Strzelecki Ranges Biodiversity Study, which identified five high biodiversity Core Areas and habitat links joining the Gunyah Rainforest reserve to Tarra Bulga National Park and College Creek. These areas were incorporated into the 'Cores and Links' proposal.

The proposal will protect nationally significant rainforest sites, secure habitat for endangered species and protect the headwaters of the streams and rivers in the Eastern Strzeleckis and add some 8000 hectares to the reserve system.

Hancock Victoria Plantations (HVP) has signed a memorandum of understanding with Trust For Nature and The Nature Conservancy to work together to protect key areas of biodiversity, while considering commitments to local jobs and industry. The company agreed to postpone harvesting in the Cores and Links.

Claims have recently been made by some conservationists that areas within the Cores and Links are being harvested. However, HVP has refuted the claims and Council observations confirm HVP's stance.

The forest itself

The Strzelecki uplands form the beginnings for all of South Gippsland's rivers and creeks, feeding Gippsland's major inlets and lakes. It is steep, wet country and the area is one of Victoria's most significant sites for cool temperate rainforest and renowned for its huge Mountain Ash.

The forest is home to a genetically distinctive endemic koala population of national conservation significance and endangered species including the Spot-tailed Quoll, Powerful Owl, Broad-toothed Rat, Barking Owl, Sooty Owl, Bent-wing Bat and the Australian Grayling. Superb Lyrebirds, loved for their beautiful song and dance gave the name Land of the Lyrebird to the South Gippsland area; their habitat is now restricted to the remnant forest.

Reserves, including the Tarra-Bulga National Park are much admired but are too small. The accounts written by the early settlers describe the variety and the sheer abundance of the wildlife- Koalas, Quolls, Gliders, Platypus, Wombats, Bandicoots and Potoroos. Echidnas were observed trundling along in long echidna trains. Gum leaves, Wattle, Ferry gullies, Blackwood, Beech and giant Ash combined into the archetypal Southern forest. Mosses, lichens, fungi and ferns covered tree trunks and fallen logs. Everything grew to an astounding size. Shrubs grew as trees. Trees grew gargantuan.

The extent and abundance has been diminished. Conservationists say that the native forest community is confined to a fifth of its former extent, and that fifth has not received the level of protection it needs to retain and boost biodiversity, habitat values and catchment health.

Given protection, the bush will bounce back, but at present, it is being kept in a state of arrested development by clearfelling.

The forest industry

The presence of the Maryvale paper mill to the north of the Ranges has added pressure on the Strzelecki forest. For more than five decades the Australian Paper Maryvale Mill (Paperlinx as it is now called) sourced Mountain Ash from the Strzelecki public forest. The company also became the major holder of freehold forest and plantations in the Strzeleckis. Since the 1960's Amcor (now Paperlinx) also leased 8600 hectares of the Strzelecki State Forest.

In 1993 the Kennett Government created the Victorian Plantations Corporation (VPC) and put most of the Strzelecki State Forest (40,000 ha.) under its management. Conservationists say this change in management took place without community consultation or environmental assessments.

In 1998, the Kennett Government sold the VPC to Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP), the Victorian branch of US based timber company, Hancock Timber Resource Group. The land that the VPC managed was transferred to HVP in the form of leaseholds. No environmental impact study was undertaken beforehand. In 2002, all of Amcor's freehold and leasehold plantations and native forest in Gippsland was purchased by HVP.

Plantation or native forest?

To complicate matters, conservationists claim 7000 hectares of Strzelecki native Mountain Ash regrowth and reforestation had its native forest status stripped away, was re-labelled plantation and included in the States plantation privatisation package.

To make this bad idea worse, they say that 20,000 more hectares of native forest in and around these areas were also included in the package, arguing that no other State Forest has had its regrowth re-classified as plantation and in no other State Forest has so much native forest been given over to private management.

The highly contentious 7000 ha. included 50 years of regenerated logging coupes, and 50 years of reforestation (native forest restoration).

In the 1980s the Land Conservation Council undertook a major assessment of the place and recommended that these areas remain in public tenure and subject to the Forests Act. It is now quasi-private and exempt from the Forests Act. Conservationists say that this forest, which locals hold dear, is being treated as if it were private land and logging has intensified in these important headwaters, fragmenting habitat, introducing exotic species through the heart of the remnant forest and threatening biodiversity, waterways, rainforest and the health of the forest.

Classifying these areas as plantation means forest can be cut frequently and replaced with any plantation species. As a result, young Mountain Ash forest is being cut and replaced with non-endemic Shining Gum and Blue Gum, they claim.

Hancock Victoria Plantations say that the areas being clearfelled are plantations established for timber production on land which had been cleared for farmland around 1900, and abandoned for decades before it was planted up in the 1960's, 70's and 80's.

They also point to what has irrefutably been the most damaging impact on the Strzelecki forests, which was the clearing for agriculture.

Government holds the key

For its part, the Strzelecki Working Group that proposes the Cores and Links solution is emphatic that Hancock Victoria Plantations must be compensated

At a recent public meeting in Mirboo North, South Gippsland Shire Councillor, David Lewis, said that while there appears to be consensus for a 'Cores and Links' proposal, the process of making this a reality remains a huge challenge.

The meeting, attended by about 75 people, was told the next step was to obtain some compensation for Grand Ridge Plantations, which had purchased timber harvesting rights from the State Government back in 1998, in the proposed cores and links area.

There is agreement that Grand Ridge Plantations are entitled to compensation if they are to lose rights to the reserves. It was hoped that the current State Government would buy the rights back, but to date the Government has refused to do this.

As a consequence the memorandum of understanding has been put into place between Trust For Nature, The Nature Conservancy and HVP, which may buy valuable time to work on ways of raising funds and turning the forest areas into reserves.

Cr Lewis said he hoped the intent of the memorandum of understanding could be carried out. "It would be a tragedy, when we have this wonderful level of agreement between all major stakeholders, if we are unable to protect our valuable forest areas," Cr Lewis said.