

Threatened Species Habitat Destruction

Forests NSW's ongoing crusade to destroy hollow-bearing trees

Forests NSW's ongoing crusade to rid State forests of hollow-bearing trees has reached a new low, with the cutting down of dozens of old-growth trees on a crown road reserve along the Styx River Forest Way, south west of Dorrigo.

Clarence Environment Centre investigators, looking into the scandalous removal, by Forests NSW, of threatened species records from their data base, visited the Styx River State Forest last week, and discovered further evidence of that agency's seemingly fanatical desire to destroy threatened species habitat.

Hollow-bearing trees provide crucial habitat for a range of threatened fauna including possums, gilders, dozens of micro-bat species, large forest owls, and some other birds including most of the parrot family.

Over a third of of the more than 90 threatened land-based fauna in the NSW north coast region rely on tree hollows. These include Brush-tailed Phascogales, Powerful Owls, Glossy-black Cockatoos, and Pygmy Possums

After observing the destruction of roadside vegetation along public roads for some 10km leading to the Styx River State Forest, undertaken by Forests NSW to allow trucks to travel faster and more safely, we also observed areas where trees had been cut down seemingly to allow the roads to dry out faster following rain.

However this environmental vandalism was nothing compared to what we found at the forest in question. Older trees, that have passed their use-by date in terms of timber supply, have long been a target for destruction by foresters that see them as something that is taking up space which could be growing younger timber trees.



For more than 60 years up to the 1980s, old trees and non timber species were routinely removed, and the forests reduced to virtual monocultures with minimal levels of biodiversity, compared to less disturbed forests. Bom Bom State Forest south of Grafton is a prime example of the result of those forest management practices, as are many forests relatively close to major population centres where logging has been ongoing for more than 150 years.

However, more remote forests such as Styx River avoided the long term degradation that forests like Bom Bom were subjected to, but a flurry of destruction in the 1970s and 80s saw massive destruction of old-growth in forests across the state. Huge numbers of over-mature trees, many over 2m diameter, were simply cut down and left to rot to make space for newly regenerating trees.

That practice officially ended with the signing of the Forests Agreements in 1999 – 2000, and the subsequent Integrated Operations Approval and Threatened Species Licence, under which Forests NSW supposedly operates, recognises the critical importance of habitat trees, with the following prescription:

a) Non-regrowth Zone Hollow-bearing Tree Retention

- i. A minimum of ten hollow-bearing trees must be retained per two hectares of net logging area. Where this density is not available, the existing hollow-bearing trees must be retained plus additional trees must be retained to meet the requirement of ten per two hectares. The additional trees retained must be those with the largest diameter at breast height over base.**
- ii. Retained, hollow-bearing trees must be selected from the trees with the largest dbhob and must be live trees and should have good crown development and minimal butt damage.**
- iii. Retained hollow-bearing trees must represent the range of hollow-bearing species that occur in the area. Preference should be given to selecting those species or trees which are most suitable for the threatened species known or likely to occur in the area.**
- iv. Trees retained outside the net logging area must not be counted as hollow-bearing trees. Stags must not be counted as hollow-bearing trees.**
- v. Hollow-bearing trees must be scattered throughout the net logging area, except where compliance with condition 5.6 (a) ii. above prevents such retention.**

Note: Stags are dead trees and, if available, ten must also be retained, along with 10 recruitment trees.

Unofficially, the destruction of habitat trees continues unabated, often 'accidentally' burned, or claiming, *“there were more than the required 10 hollow-bearing trees per 2 hectares”* or, the most popular excuse, *“they were dangerous, and had to be knocked down for occupational health and safety reasons”*.

Literally dozens of old-growth trees have been felled, along at least a one kilometre section of Styx River Forest Way because it was determined they were a danger. The worst part of this story is that the road is the boundary between the State Forest on the north, and national park on the south, and the road reserve, described by Forests NSW as “ministerial land” is 60m wide in places, and we observed some trees that had been cut down as far as 50m from the road on the national park side. No way could that have presented any danger to road users.

Even many of these trees that were chopped down near the road, had healthy trunks, with little sign of rot that might cause the tree fall onto the road and injure someone.



Neither of the trees pictured above and below could have been said to be unstable, or a threat to life and limb, but they were cut down anyway,



It is an established fact the Eucalyptus species will not form substantial hollows for at least 200 years, and with solid trunks like those pictured, we estimate they would have remained standing, to provide prime nesting and roosting sites for native fauna, for another hundred years.

To compound the seriousness of this act is the fact that there are records of Powerful owls in the compartment, a threatened species that utilises tree hollows for nesting. The Licence prescription that is supposed to ameliorate the impact on Powerful owls from logging is a strange one. It involves the counting of Greater Gliders, a favourite prey for the owls and also a tree-hollow dependent species. Therefore a spotlight survey must be undertaken and if more than one greater glider is observed per hectare, then 8 habitat trees must be left in every hectare.



Powerful Owl. *Photo courtesy P. Edwards*

According to Forests NSW's ecological report, no less than 20 Greater Gliders were sighted in one 6½ hectare transect, a density of more than 3 per hectare.

However, a quick assessment of the logged area shows there is nowhere near the required number of hollow-bearing trees, and probably were not there prior to the logging, so the destruction of so many trees along the adjoining road reserve simply compounds the impact, and is totally unacceptable.

The forester responsible for cutting down the trees admitted that a ranger from the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) had expressed outrage over the destruction so we contacted the Dorrigo office of OEH to ask what action would be taken over the destruction.

As usual the response was disappointing and proved once again that, when it comes to the crunch, there is little protection for habitat trees. In this case it was explained that the land in question is along a gazetted forest road. Therefore, while being crown land and under the auspices of the NSW Department of Lands, the responsibility for day to day management of the road falls to Forests NSW.

We are seeking legal advice as to whether the destruction of hollow-bearing trees on a crown road reserve is covered by the Native Vegetation Act, or the Threatened Species Conservation Act, under which the destruction of hollow-bearing trees is listed as a Key Threatening Process, and is therefore an offense. We will keep you informed of any outcomes.

Compiled by John Edwards
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