

**Address to NCC Conference on threatened species impacts from forestry.  
J. Edwards - 5.5.2012**

I've been asked to speak on the impacts of State forest logging on threatened fauna, and it would be really good to have reams of statistical data to quote from, but I don't. In fact, despite one of Forests NSW's core functions being to manage forests for biodiversity conservation, there is no system in place to measure the health or numbers of forest fauna from one logging event to the next.

When it comes to dealing with threatened species, Forests NSW operates under the Integrated Forests Operations Approval (IFOA) and a Threatened Species Licence issued some 12 years ago by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, now the Office of Environment and Heritage. After reading those documents, and the assurances we receive from the responsible agencies, from the Ministers down, one could be excused for believing that our threatened species are really lucky to be living in a State forest (Robyn Parker's assurance that logging is good for Koalas is a typical example).

Under the IFOA, Pre-logging fauna surveys are to be undertaken by fully qualified experts, and there are prescriptions that have to be followed if threatened species are found to be present. Specific numbers of hollow-bearing and recruitment habitat trees must be clearly marked, protected and retained; feed trees, nests, roosts and den sites are identified, marked and protected; buffer zones must be established and clearly delineated, and dedicated staff must be on hand to ensure there are no animals in harm's way.



**Old-growth tree cut down for OH&S reasons**

In reality though, things are very different. Audits of logging operations that have been undertaken by environment groups on the north coast over the past 2 to 3 years have revealed the systematic breaching of virtually every threatened species prescription. Feed trees are rarely marked for retention, hollow-bearing old-growth trees are routinely destroyed for OH&S reasons, and we have yet to find a single logged forest where the required numbers of habitat and recruitment trees have been retained. Pre-logging fauna surveys are failing to identify threatened species and endangered ecological communities, and only last month we discovered that records

of threatened Rufous Scrub-birds at Styx River State Forest had been deleted from Forests NSW's data base.

The latter has occurred despite there being previous Scrub-bird, records and mapped habitat in that forest, and Forests NSW's excuse, was that the recording officer, the person they had directed to do the pre-logging fauna survey, was insufficiently qualified to identify the bird. Their unilateral decision to delete the records freed up a minimum 40 hectares of forest for logging.

To top it all off, forests are now being logged at double the 40% basal area allowable under the IFOA, leading to virtual clear-fell operations (basal area percentage is roughly equal to canopy loss. i.e. 50% basal area logging equals 50% canopy reduction). This is something Forests NSW is being allowed to do simply by earmarking some areas of the forest as an offset, which are not immediately logged, but they return a year or so later to grab the remainder. OEH, the responsible regulatory body allows this to happen because the IFOA does not stipulate a minimum return period.



**Virtual clear-felling next to rainforest at Wedding Bells State Forest, causing extensive damage to rainforest verges**

This over-logging is the direct result of the unrealistic timber supply contracts signed by the NSW Government, and not only is this virtual clear-felling leaving the reserved areas of rainforest and old-growth in isolated pockets, it is facilitating the spread of Bell Miner Associated Dieback that is killing forests all along the east coast of NSW.

We do have some related statistics for the Clarence Valley, and these are provided by Patricia Edwards, the Threatened Species Recording officer for the local branch of Wires. In 2000 - 2001, the one year period immediately following the implementation of the IFOA, 8 animals, none of them threatened, were called in by State Forests' staff. From 2001 however, it appears that Forests NSW either tightened up its fauna protection, or made a decision not to report injured animals. From August 2003 to the present, CV Wires has received 33,770 calls for injured and orphaned wildlife, 562 of which were for threatened species, and of those 562, only one, a Masked Owl, was called in from a logging operation. That incident was referred to National Parks on 5.8.2005, and rescuers arrived to find the bird was already dead.

In July, and again in August 2010, Patricia, in her official position with Wires, wrote to the then Director General of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, Lisa Corbyn, expressing concern over the lack of any reports of injured animals from State Forests, and a suspicion that those animals were being summarily dispatched in the field, and requested that logging operatives be given training in the humane capture and immediate care of injured animals.

Both letters received responses, one from the then deputy DG, Greg Sullivan, and the other from Regional Director (south) Gary Whytcross. Both explained how the IFOA minimised the impacts on threatened species, but supported the training idea, and forwarded the letters to Forests NSW for their consideration. Almost 2 years on and CV Wires is still awaiting a response from that agency.

Gary Whytcross also stated that he had forwarded the letters to the IFOA review panel for possible inclusion, but that review (the first 5 yearly) which was supposed to have been held in 2005, is now 7 years overdue, and has, to the best of my knowledge, still not been released.

My greatest concern is for habitat trees, those large forest giants with hollow limbs that serve as nature's unit blocks. These indispensable components of our forest ecosystems take hundreds of years to mature, and provide crucial shelter, roosting and nesting sites for a third of all Australia's threatened fauna species.

As stated earlier, these trees are being routinely destroyed by forestry operators, something that was official policy earlier last century, with the aim of ridding the forest of all unmerchantable trees, and reducing the forest to even-aged monocultures of preferred timber species. So what **was** official policy now appears to be “unofficial policy”. At last week's Styx State forest audit, we found that more than 100 of these old trees were cut down along some 3.5 km of roadsides. Some had been standing more than 40 metres from the road, and in areas where logging is excluded, and many were solid based and posed no threat to anyone, but they were knocked over regardless in what appeared to be a purely bloody-minded exercise.



**Styx River State Forest. More than 100 old-growth trees cut down, ostensibly for OH&S reasons**

At Clouds Creek in 2011, we gathered evidence that habitat trees had been deliberately torched during post harvest burning (i.e they were burned but the surrounding vegetation was not).



So let's wrap things up with a few specifics. And staying with hollow-bearing trees, there are 20 odd microbat species living on the north coast of NSW, 15 of them listed as threatened, and most of them utilise tree hollows. So why is it that only 3 of them, Golden tipped, Myotis and Little Bentwing, are ever mentioned in harvest plans? And has anyone here ever seen a harvest plan where a bat roost has been identified? Every plan I've seen has "*nil detected*" in the appropriate column. It's not rocket science, stand below a tree with a large hollow at dusk, and chances are you can watch them fly in and out, and there are ultrasonic detection devices that will identify the species.

Moving on to Koalas, and we all know they are in trouble, and that loss of habitat is a major cause. The recent destruction of Koala habitat from logging at Boambee is well recorded, as is the widespread logging of core habitat on private property in the Coffs Harbour area. However, in the past 2 years, similar Koala habitat destruction has occurred at other Coffs Coast forests at Pine Creek and Wedding Bells, where an estimated 80% of basal area was logged in some areas. If that is not enough, Harvest Plans are currently in place to log Orara East SF where koalas are also striving to survive. If a Koala is sighted, or more than 10 scats counted below a feed tree, that tree is deemed to be 'high use' and a 10m buffer applied around the tree, while the surrounding trees are logged.



**Logged Koala habitat at Clouds Creek**

At Clouds Creek, at least 6 adjoining compartments, all known to have supported Koalas, were logged over the last couple of years, two more compartments are currently being logged, in which we measured over 70% of basal area has been taken, and now a harvest plan for two more compartments in Clouds Creek, and two more in the adjacent Ellis State Forest, have been completed, showing high use koala areas in both, which will be logged at rates above 60% of basal area. However, locals have reported that Koalas have never really recovered from the disastrous logging of old-growth that occurred in the Clouds Creek forest just 13 years ago, when a number of Koalas were found dead.

At Marengo State Forest, a population of seriously endangered Black-striped Wallabies were found. Among the identified threats in the Scientific Committee's determination are: "*Clearing, isolation, and fragmentation of habitat for agriculture and forestry*", and "*... simplification of habitat with loss of dense understorey ...*".

In a caring gesture towards the Ellis population, the harvest plan promises to ensure the "*removal of no more than 50% canopy cover in the net harvest area*" (remember they are not supposed to log more than 40% of basal area); they also promise to "*protect ground cover to the greatest extent possible*", and "*incorporate the area as a priority site for the regional pest control program*".

The sorry saga of neglect of threatened fauna by Forests NSW would not be complete without mention of the Yellow-bellied Glider. The presence of these Gliders is frequently identified by chewed marks on some Eucalypt species, known as "sap feed trees".

There are specific requirements under the TS Licence that should be followed when these sap trees are identified; specifically: "*All Yellow-bellied Glider sap feed trees must be retained ...*" and "*all sap feed trees must be marked for retention.*" In reality, I do not recall seeing a marked sap feed tree in any of the half dozen forests that we have audited.

The Licence is very specific. *“Where there is a record of a Yellow-bellied Glider, the following must apply: - i. Within a 100 metres radius of each retained Yellow-bellied Glider sap feed tree, 15 feed trees must be retained.”* They *“Mature and late mature trees must be retained as feed trees where these are available, and must must have good crown development, minimal butt damage, and should not be suppressed.”* Not only that but: *“The retained feed trees must be of the same species as the identified sap feed tree, or should be trees that shed their bark in long strips, eg. species from Blue, Flooded, Grey, Red and White Gum groups and,”* finally, *“ they must be marked for retention.”*

At Clouds Creek we identified several hectares of forest within 100m of identified feed trees and call detection sites where no mature trees had been retained, much less marked. Our complaint to OEHL received the explanation, from the same Gary Whytcross as it happens, that the required sap trees would be in exclusion zones that overlapped the 100m radius, and as they were in the exclusion zone OEHL did not require that they be marked. The fact that the exclusion zone was rainforest, and contained no Eucalypts of any description, did no seem to phase Mr Whytcross, as he never responded to our letter pointing out that fact.

So in conclusion, with what appears to be OEHL's active collusion in turning a blind eye to these breaches, there is no doubt in my mind that our native forest fauna are in deep trouble as a result of current forest management practices.

I was also asked, as well as talking about threats to forest fauna, to talk about opportunities. I've given this some considerable thought over the years, and believe it is possible to apply ecologically sustainable forest management. That, I believe, would involve logging rates of no more than 10%, rather than the current 40%, and be undertaken at longer intervals, possibly 25 yearly rather than the current 8 to 14 yearly cycles, with much improved management in the interim.

However, I have long lost any trust in those forest managers, or the political system that supports them, and see no alternative other than to put an end to native forest logging in its entirety.

That's my opinion. Thank you.

John Edwards



**Let's keep our forests healthy, and stop industrial logging.**