

What is O'Farrell doing to our national parks?

Prior to the 2011 election, the then Coalition opposition released a policy statement that: *“The NSW Liberals and Nationals are committed to conserving NSW’s unique national parks and wildlife.”*

However, immediately on gaining power, Barry O'Farrell dumped The Hon Catherine Cusack MLC, who had effectively held the position of Opposition Environment spokesperson for several years, and demolished the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water. In their place, he formed the Office of Environment and Heritage under the pathetically inept ministership of Robyn Parker, whose environmental credentials could be written on the back of a very small postage stamp, with room to spare.

The O'Farrell Government has spent no time whittling away environmental protection at every opportunity. Within days of taking office, protective zonings for the critically endangered Grey Nurse Shark were cut back, and bans on dangerous fishing methods in the shark's habitat were lifted. Environmental legislation was weakened following reviews into a raft of Acts, Codes, and regulations; and the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act was also “streamlined” to cut red tape.

By withholding cooperation, the right wing dominated state governments, pressured the Federal Government into agreeing to relinquish its environmental powers under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act which, fortunately, has been put on hold following heavy lobbying from conservation heavyweights from around the world. So what does the O'Farrell Government have in store for our national parks?

Grazing.

At the end of 2012, Minister Parker announced the commencement of “grazing trials” for scientific purposes in some national parks, despite the fact that grazing has been occurring in numerous state forests or more than 100 years, where any scientific observations could easily have been obtained.

Grazing impacts by a variety of hooved species are well known, being listed as various key threatening processes, and identified as a major contributor to threatened species decline across the country.

Observations by the Clarence Environment Centre in Boundary Creek State forest during 2004, where grazing is still allowed, revealed that there was a greatly reduced understorey diversity, and suppressed regeneration as a result. Furthermore, during dry periods cattle congregated in drainage lines, and along creek and gully banks, trampling riparian vegetation, increasing gully vegetation's vulnerability to bushfire, causing erosion, and turning pristine pools into mud wallows full of faeces.

Logging.

Also in 2012, the Coalition Parties joined with the Shooters to hold an Upper House Inquiry into the management of public land in NSW. To anyone who attended the Inquiry hearings, or have read the transcripts, it is clear that one objective of the Inquiry is to allow logging to take place in National Parks; sustainable logging of course, just as we have seen occurring in state forests for the past 10 years.

The term “sustainable”, when associated with the management of forested land for logging, has proved to be a meaningless joke, both when used to support logging in state forests under the Integrated Forest Operations Approval (IFOA), or on privately owned land under the Private Native Forestry Code of Practice

“Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management” (EFSM), is supposed to underpin the IFOA, and is defined as: *“The management of forests so that they are sustained in perpetuity for the benefit of society, by ensuring that the values of forests are not lost or degraded for current and future generations.”*

The timber industry believes that EFSM is satisfied by the creation of exclusion zones where old growth and rainforest is protected, along with riparian and other special management zones that supposedly protect threatened species.

At the Grafton hearing NO. 5 [PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT] held on Friday 5 October 2012, local timber miller Spiro Notaras observed: *“You have a look at that Bom Bom forest and you will see a real good example of a native hardwood regrowth forest”*.

Bom Bom State Forest lies just south of the city of Grafton and has had a long history of logging. The Clarence Environment Centre undertook a survey of hollow-bearing trees in Bom Bom in 2007 and found there were virtually none following previous forestry practices that saw all unmerchantable trees removed. Grazing too was also conducted in the forest for many years and this, coupled with high frequency burning, has seen floristic diversity greatly reduced, probably less than 50% of what would normally be expected. Fauna diversity would likewise be depleted.

As a result the Bom Bom forest has been reduced to a virtual Spotted Gum monoculture, but what is considered by Mr Notaras and his industry as an ideally managed forest (see below).

Interestingly, Mr Notaras reported that his company, *“tendered for Bom Bom, which is on the outskirts of South Grafton, on a 28 year rotation in perpetuity.”* That tender of course was made over 50 years ago; today that forest, and most of the State's forests, are being logged on rotations between 10 and 15 years.



Bom Bom State forest where over 100 years of logging, grazing and burning, has reduced the forest to a virtual monoculture, with greatly depleted understorey and levels of biodiversity.

Despite the grandiose claims by the timber industry lobby groups such as Timber Communities Australia, and Forests Products Association that the forests are being logged using world's best practice, it is widely accepted that the logging practices currently being adopted are anything but sustainable, as evidenced by the following quotes:

1. The Institute of Foresters of Australia – Letter to Rob Oakeshott, 2009:
*“In NSW the adopted forest strategy is to **unsustainably cut** the available public native forest through to 2023 at which point hardwood plantations are proposed to be available to make up the very significant shortfall in logs. Unfortunately, the species mix and rate of plantation development in NSW post 2000 **makes this unachievable**”.*
2. Dailan Pugh, RFA negotiator, July 2011.
“Timber volumes were intentionally committed above the estimated sustainable yields in northeast NSW by both the Forests Agreements and Regional Forest Agreements”. The fact that Forests NSW has drastically overestimated the available timber volumes, is simply compounding the problems now being faced.
3. The Environmental Defenders Office – Executive Summary, of its report - **“COMPLIANCE FAILURES IN THE PUBLIC FORESTS OF NEW SOUTH WALES”**, July 2011.
“It is clear that native forests are not being managed in a way that complies with the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) and the conservation of biodiversity.”
4. The Victorian Dept of Primary Industries - “Economic Policy Settings in the Forest and Timber Industry – An inter-jurisdictional comparison”, May 2008.
“There is concern that Forests NSW will not be able to meet commitments in Wood Supply Agreements with the current forest areas allocated for commercial forest production. This is evidenced through the fact that Forests NSW is purchasing private native forest resources to meet current commitments.”

5. The NSW Auditor General - "2009 Performance Audit":
 - a) *To meet wood supply commitments, the native forest managed by Forests NSW on the north coast is being cut faster than it is growing back.*
 - b) *The North Coast region has been unable to meet its species commitment since 2004 for blackbutt (the North Coast's most logged species, at 24%).*
 - c) *current yield from native forests in the north coast is not sustainable in the long term.*
6. In 2005, Boral was compensated to the amount of half a million dollars for short supply of timber in NSW. That same company is currently in dispute with the NSW Government claiming further compensation amounting to a sum rumoured to be in excess of half a billion dollars.

Forests NSW has been losing money for years, and all of this is being paid for by the taxpayers of NSW, while the forests themselves are being degraded as never before. As one person described it, *"this is a scandalous redistribution of wealth from the people of NSW to Boral and other timber industry heavyweights"*



Compare the size of trees harvested 50 years ago, with those cut today (Clouds Creek 2010)

An estimated 90% of all timber product from Australia is sold as wood-chip, mostly exported at 'give-away' prices, while forests, both public and privately owned, are being decimated. Any suggestion that this supposed ecologically sustainable logging should be extended into conservation reserves will simply increase the availability of timber and see ever greater volumes of wood chipped and other low value products shipped off-shore, or burned to generate electricity and add to pollution.

We believe part of the problem with the management of state forests is the price of timber. Put simplistically, double the price, and you halve the demand, and make forestry more sustainable and viable. In every logging operation, you will find rejected logs, huge piles of offcuts, and tree crowns with large amounts of wood that would have been salvaged if it was economically viable to do so. Make wood more expensive, and the waste will drop significantly.

At the same time we believe the destruction of native forest for low value product, particularly export wood-chip, has to cease. Taxpayers should no longer be required to subsidise the industry's waste.

And now, because the timber industry chose to log the forests at unsustainable levels, the NSW native forest timber resource is predicted to run out by 2016, and the push is on to allow logging of currently protected areas in state forests, **and also in national parks**.

Hunting in National Parks

At the end of May 2012, the NSW Premier, the Hon Barry Farrell MP, made the surprising announcement that he had broken a pre-election commitment and had done a deal with the Shooters and Fishers Party to gain their support for electricity privatisation legislation. That deal now allows sporting shooters to hunt in some 79 national parks, nature and conservation reserves across the state, something the shooters lobby has been trying to achieve for years.

In fact the Shooters Party attempted to 'extort' support for its Shooters Bill from the Labor Government, in 2010, in exchange for their votes the Upper House. That earlier Shooters Bill outraged the community and would have allowed the hunting of a range of native and feral animals, using guns, bows and arrows, packs of dogs and black powder, on all public land including national parks. The list of native species identified as 'game' included Black Swans, Kangaroos, Wallabies, and a range of ducks including some that are listed as threatened.

As a result of the groundswell of public opposition the Labor Government, as corrupt as it was, refused to play ball, but were ousted from Government in March 2011. However, with a record majority and 3 years to go before the next election, the O'Farrell Government clearly felt it could ignore public opinion and do whatever it needs to do to proceed with its unpopular sale of the State's electricity assets.

Even before the Shooters Bill was proposed the Invasive Species Council (ISC) had responded to the NSW Game Council's lobbying for hunting to be allowed on public land for conservation purposes, by releasing a series of critical reports authored by Carol Booth, including "Is recreational hunting effective for feral animal control?"

In that report Ms Booth identified that recreational hunters remove too few animals, focus hunting efforts on easily accessible areas, target larger animals (trophy hunting), and that the shooting of some species is limited by bag limits that protect the hunting resource. Moreover, she identified that hunters are motivated, not to eliminate populations of feral species, but to expand and increase them to make hunting easier and to increase hunting options claiming: "*Most of the recent substantial increase in the number of feral deer herds in Australia has probably occurred due to hunters illegally translocating deer to new areas*".

In NSW deer hunting is controlled through bag limits imposed by the pro-hunting Game Council to ensure that the deer populations do not decline. This, despite the serious damage deer cause to native flora and the habitat of a range of native fauna, which has led to deer being declared a Key Threatening Process, in NSW and Victoria.

So when recreational shooters describe themselves as “Conservation Hunters”, it is clear their conservation priority is aimed at conserving their sport, rather than native fauna, and in fact we believe most do not give a damn for native animals unless they are allowed to hunt them.

The ISC identifies that *“Ground shooting (as a culling method) has been accepted by RSPCA as a humane method of controlling large vertebrate animals under defined circumstances, and according to the Standard Operating Procedure for deer (Sharp & Saunders 2004) ground shooting can be humane “when it is carried out by experienced, skilled shooters; the animal can be clearly seen and is within range; and, the correct firearm, ammunition and shot replacement is used.”*

Needless to say recreational hunting cannot provide those conditions. At an Office of Environment and Heritage workshop into pest management, where there was an over-representation of recreational shooters promoting their cause, one active hunter was at least 80 years old, and as deaf as a post. He held a hunting licence despite his obvious frailty and poor hearing, presenting what we would describe as a clear danger to other forest users

The justifications put forward to support “conservation hunting” have all come from the the hunter's lobby, with few if any conservationists supporting the move. In short those arguments are:

1. Recreational hunting is effective for feral animal control and highly beneficial for conservation;
2. Recreational hunters offer a “free” or “low cost” service; and
3. Hunters are aligned to conservation, and provide the most effective basis for conservation.

The extensive investigations by the Invasive Species Council of Australia have debunked all three claims, uncovering more than 30 reports and scientific papers (see below) identifying the following:

1. The Game Council's own records show that recreational hunting in State Forests does not effectively control feral animals. For example, of the estimated one million foxes in NSW (there are estimated to be about 7 million Australia wide), recreational hunters in state forests kill an average of only about 650 a year (there are about 600 state forests in NSW). If 25% of foxes are breeding females, there is the potential for close to a million pups to be born annually.

The Game Council has produced similar figures for feral pigs, while in 2 year period between 2006 and 2008, only 279 cats and 106 dogs were shot by recreational hunters in state forests. That cannot be called 'control'.

2. The claim that recreational shooting provides a “low cost” service is extremely questionable. In the 5 years between 2004 and 2009, the NSW taxpayer funded the Game Council to the tune of more than \$9 million. Shooting licences netted less than \$2 million, leaving a net cost to taxpayers of more than \$8 million.
3. Recreational hunters are more concerned with preserving feral animal populations to perpetuate their sport, than they are about conservation.
 1. Unscrupulous hunters are actually introducing pest species, particularly pigs and deer, into pestfree areas to provide new hunting opportunities.
 2. Many sporting shooters aim for trophies, only selecting the largest animals.
 3. Recreational hunters cannot devote more than 1 or 2 days to a job, which normally requires an intensive operation sometimes lasting weeks to achieve effective control.
 4. It is impractical to attempt to judge the individual skills and knowledge levels of every prospective hunter applying to hunt under the proposed legislative changes, and it won't happen. This means the claim that only highly skilled operators will be allowed to hunt in national parks is extremely questionable.
 5. Hunting with bows and arrows is not humane, and the use of dogs will see, particularly slow-moving native animals such as Koalas and Wombats, killed or maimed (dog hunting is not yet allowed in national parks).

Apart from the clear evidence available that so called conservation hunting is not an effective feral animal control mechanism, and is likely to actually increase the number of feral animals in Australia, the Clarence Environment Centre has expressed numerous other concerns.

1. The most serious concern is the threat of personal injury, and even the killing, of park and forest workers and other users of public lands. The New Zealand experience, where three innocent bystanders have been killed in that country in as many years, should have alarm bells ringing, because it is only a matter of time before the same happens here.
2. Immediate neighbours are also placed in danger of being accidentally shot. Bullets from high powered rifles travel for kilometres.
3. The use of dogs to hunt feral animals is an appallingly cruel act. Fox hunting with hounds has been banned in most civilised countries, yet here in NSW we are planning to allow unaccompanied children as young as 12 to hunt with dogs, knives and bows and arrows. This is almost unimaginable! Dogs will not discriminate between feral and native species.

4. International and domestic tourists, attracted by our renowned national parks and wilderness areas, will not want the experience to be marred by a background of gunfire. There is nothing more unsettling, or frightening, than to be in a forest when a gun is discharged nearby, usually by someone that is unaware of your presence.
5. Currently, a permit to hunt can be acquired “on line”, something that is unlikely to change given the expected thousands of applicants. It will be impractical to test the expertise of applicants in the field (shooting on a target range is vastly different to hunting an animal). The hunter has to know precisely where to aim to ensure an instant kill, and the target site differs from animal to animal. How can skill levels, fitness, and psychological profiles, of thousands of shooters be properly assessed?

Uncontrolled hunting officially begins on 1st March. However, in the mean time, two high ranking members of the NSW Game Council, a de-facto gift to the Shooters Party by the previous Labor Government, and the body responsible for distributing hunting licences, have been suspended pending an investigation into allegations of illegal hunting, trespass, and cruelty to an animal. We await the outcome and flow on effects of that investigation.

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