

# Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc

## Annual Report 2019-20



Waterfall at Snobs Creek: this magical beauty spot in the Rubicon is threatened by clearfell logging in the nearby forest.

## Welcome

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Annual Report for 2019-20 of the Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc., in which we report on our activities over the last twelve months<sup>1</sup>.

The Rubicon Forest Protection Group recognises the Rubicon Forest and Murrindindi as the traditional lands of the Taungurung people and that sovereignty was never ceded. We appreciate Taungurung stewardship of these lands, including the forests, over many millennia past and into the present and future. We remember with respect and affection Uncle Roy Patterson of Taggerty, a senior Taungurung man who was also one of the founders of our group.

If you agree with our purpose and strategies please join us (see last page of this report) or continue to work along side us. If you are not sure, please review the material presented in this report, and on our website ([www.rubiconforest.org](http://www.rubiconforest.org)), and talk with us, in person, on Facebook, or perhaps write to [info@rubiconforest.org](mailto:info@rubiconforest.org).

Together we can save and restore this beautiful forest.



Ken Deacon,  
Convenor  
30 June 2020

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1. If you are reading a hard copy of this report please note that the PDF version (with active links) is online at: [rubiconforest.org/about](http://rubiconforest.org/about).



## Purpose

The Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc (RFPG) brings together members of the Murrindindi community, and beyond, who are concerned about the future of the Rubicon Forest.

The purpose of the association is to protect and promote the values of the Rubicon Forest and to contribute to protecting and promoting the values of Victoria's native forests more widely.

These values include biodiversity, recreation, culture and spirit, tourism, environmental services and the capacity for wood production.

## People

The most valued resources of the RFPG are our people: our members and friends and the volunteers who serve on our Executive Committee.

At 30 June 2020 RFPG had 109 members and 65 friends (provided support but not yet members).

The committee members for 2019-20 were: Ken Deacon (convenor), Diane Robb, Ann Jelinek, Lea Jellinek, Bruce Hyatt, Jill Sanguinetti, Nick Legge, David Legge, Bev Dick, Robbert Veerman, Elaine O'Shannessy.

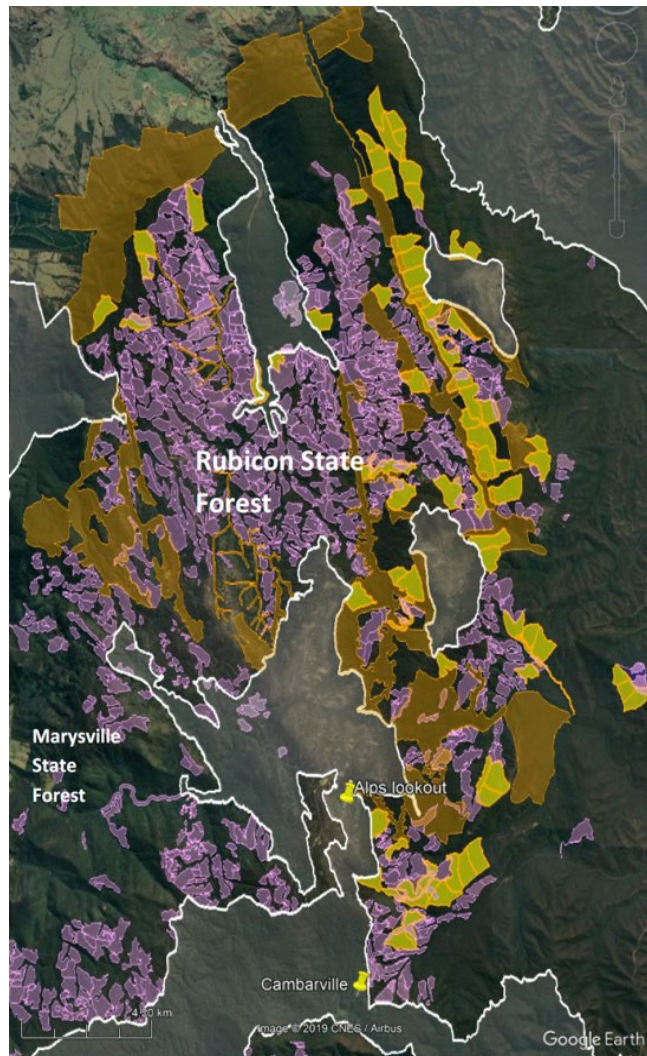


Figure 1. 40 years of logging in the Rubicon Forest  
Purple shows areas within coupes already logged; Light green shows coupes scheduled for logging; Brown shows special protection zones  
(Map prepared by Nick Legge on the basis of VF and DEWLP data)

## The threat

The Rubicon Forest is under threat from unsustainable logging, increasing bushfire risk, and from climate change.

Figure 1 shows the extent of the logging over the last 40 years, intensified since the fires of 2009. See also our video, [100 years of logging](#).

The scale and intensity of logging is unsustainable, just in terms of wood production. Within a few years there will be a dramatic reduction in harvestable timber in the Rubicon Forest, the Central Highlands and native forests in Victoria. Simply because too much has been taken. (More on unsustainable logging [here](#).)

The extent and scale of the logging is also unsustainable in terms of biodiversity. The harvesting and regeneration practices of VicForests do not replace the rich understory ecosystems. The intensive

harvesting not only removes habitat trees and degrades the ecosystem but completely skews the age class profile of the forest to an overwhelming preponderance of younger trees.

Reducing the complexity of a forest ecosystem reduces its resilience in the face of disturbance.

Victoria's native forests are facing an existential challenge in the form of global warming. The degradation of the forest ecosystems weakens the forest's capacity to respond to climate change. (More on loss of biodiversity and resilience [here](#).)

Large scale intensive logging degrades other values of the forest, in particular, recreation and tourism.

The Rubicon Forest (still) has drives, walks and views of breath-taking beauty. Patches of old ash forest provide natural cathedrals for reflecting on the place of humans in the biosphere; the relations of humans to Mother Earth. (More on tourism potential [here](#).)

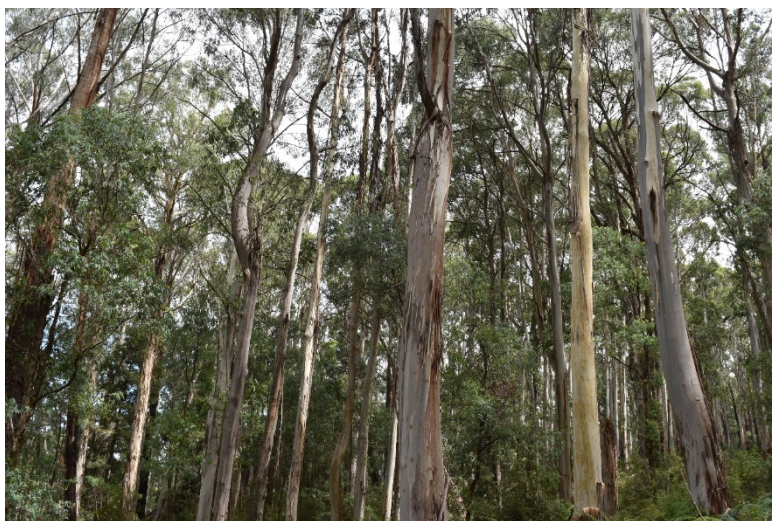
Tourism offers far greater employment opportunities and economic potential than contemporary high technology logging. Yet as coupe after coupe is razed the tourist potential is further diminished.

## Objectives

In the face of these threats, the RFPG has adopted the following objectives to guide our activities:

- An immediate moratorium on further logging in the Rubicon Forest.
- Reform of the regulatory framework governing the uses of the Forest to guarantee ecologically sustainable forest management and a balanced approach to the requirements of different uses of the forest.
- Promote the conservation of threatened forest ecosystems across Victoria.
- Investment in the development of forest tourism and protection and restoration of the recreational, spiritual and tourism values of the forest.
- Adoption of policies at state and federal levels to support a sustainable plantation industry to meet the needs of the domestic wood products market; investment in innovation in wood products manufacturing and alternative feedstock for paper manufacturing.

(RFPG's full policy package [here](#).)



## Activities 2019-20

Highlights of the RFPG's program of action in 2019 - 2020 include the following.

### 1. Tax Deductible Status Achieved

We were accepted on 27 May 2020 for registration on the Commonwealth Register of Environmental Organisations (REO) (after a long wait!). This has given us tax deductible gift recipient status.

### 2. Monitoring Ongoing Logging Operations

A major focus of our activities is the monitoring of ongoing logging in the Rubicon State Forest (RSF) and our liaison with Timber Harvesting Compliance Unit of DELWP advising where logging practices appear to breach the Code of Forest Practice and the principles of ecological sustainability as set out in the National Forests Policy. This work entails inspecting coupes and checking that coupe plans are compliant with statutory requirements; monitoring the presence of threatened species in coupes listed (on VicForests' Timber Release Plan) and liaising with DELWP where required.

A key feature of our monitoring of logging practices in the Rubicon State Forest has been compliance with the long term planning provisions of the Code, the provisions which are focused on long term ecological sustainability. This has involved extensive ministerial correspondence including departmental FOI requests.

### 3. Community Education and Policy Advocacy

Much of our work involves policy advocacy (correspondence with local government, local media, local politicians) and community education (through videos, website, op eds and social media).

We have also directed our attention to the production and export of forest products and local sale of native forest timber, including both ecological and economic analysis. This work also feeds into our community education and policy advocacy.

A further focus of our monitoring and advocacy has been the opportunities for tourism development in the RSF and advocacy around relatively minor investments that would nonetheless yield significant personal health benefits and regional economic benefits.

### 4. Participating in Policy Consultations

Another major focus of our work involves participating in various policy consultations. Over the last year we have written submissions and contributed to:

- the EPBC Act Review,
- the Code of Forest Practice reviews,
- the Victorian Parliamentary Ecosystem Degradation Inquiry,
- various consultations over amendments to the VicForests Timber Release Plan,
- the VicForests High Conservation Values consultation,
- the review of VicForests accreditation application under the Forests Stewardship Council,
- the Victorian Government's review of the definition of old growth, and
- the Commonwealth State consultation over the renewal of the regional forests agreements

### 5. Preventing and reporting Breaches of the Code

Part of our work has been to monitor the Government's Allocation Order, VicForests' Timber Release Plan (TRP) and Coupe Schedule, the harvesting operations of VicForests contractors, and the success or otherwise of VicForests' regeneration practices. (Have a look at our [regulatory map](#) to understand what each of these regulatory processes do and how they relate to each other).



Over the last year we have focussed mainly on trying to protect remaining stands of intact forest in the Snobs Creek valley and the area abutting the Mount Torbreck Scenic and Natural Features Reserve and the planned extension of logging in the southern section near Cambarville and Lake Mountain. The task of locating the coupes, assessing the possibility of breaches, monitoring the harvesting and regeneration in all of the coupes scheduled for logging and harvested is huge. Fig 3 which shows the north eastern part of the Rubicon Forest indicates the extent and magnitude of the work that needs to be done to monitor logging and assess breaches of the Code of Forest Practice.

Over the last three years we have identified over 20 probable breaches of the Code ranging from escaped regeneration burns, landscape and visual impact, impact of regeneration burn on habitat trees, failure to retain habitat trees, harvesting and roading through waterways, soil erosion and megacoupes (overly narrow and incomplete buffers).

We have had one or two small victories in terms of getting vulnerable coupes removed from the TRP but generally the machine rolls on.



Fig 4. Saturation harvesting, Royston Range (Photo EMF)

A recent breach report concerned the coupe Rampart at the Dom Dom Saddle where recent logging has left a gash which is visible from the Maroondah Highway on the Black Spur. Even this prime tourist attraction was not safe from VicForests' predatory logging regime.

Despite all our work in lodging breach reports, almost all of our complaints have been rejected, often on arbitrary or spurious grounds. For example, the Timber Harvesting Compliance Unit (THCU) rejection of the breach report regarding Rampart at Dom Dom was that it is not very visible and most cars are driving quite fast at that point. In rejecting a breach of the scenic landscape protection clause applying to views from the Rubicon Historic Area, the THCU determined that the area had been mistakenly included in the relevant list, notwithstanding the magnificent and widely viewed landscape of the area.

## 6. Engaging with VicForests

On a number of occasions we have expressed our concern to VicForests for late notification of its harvesting schedule and its failure to publish coupe plans and coupe maps online, in addition to its failure to adhere to the principles of the Code of Forest Practice.

RFPG will continue to engage with VicForests as part of our 'one coupe at a time' strategy. The sad fact of the matter is that VicForests has only limited discretion in view of its government imposed obligations to deliver under the Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act of 1996. Coupe by coupe negotiation and even significant revision of the Code will not save the forests in the face of extreme and unsustainable government imposed harvesting targets.

AS part of its [FSC 2020 project](#) VicForests 'has reviewed and amended its Harvesting and Regeneration Systems and High Conservation Values (HVCs) Management Systems to better align with FSC Controlled Wood standard' and released following draft plans for stakeholder input. RFPG submitted a highly critical response to both of VicForests' consultation papers. See [RFPG highlights flaws in VicForests' HCV and HRS consultation papers](#) (30 June 2019).

Subsequently it was announced that VF had achieved Responsible Wood certification (see [VF media release re Responsible Wood certification](#), 7/2/2019 and [BSI summary report](#), 15/1/2019).

RFPG has commented, in subsequent correspondence to both VF and BIS, that the complete lack of consultation with conservation groups in the BIS audit did not bode well for VF's stated intention to address the criticisms in the SCS report of its 'stakeholder engagement'.

## **7. Films and videos**

Lea Jelinek has been working with Charles Street to produce a series of videos which can be viewed on our our website. See also Marcus Veerman's short sharp video on the threat to the Snobs Creek native fish hatchery now posed by logging just a few kilometres away.

## **8. Threatened species**

Lea Jelinek has collaborated with members of the Port Philip Extinction Rebellion and WOTCH (Wildlife of the Central Highlands) to train and organise people to join excursions into designated coupes to identify and record endangered wildlife.

## **9. Media**

We have maintained a continuing stream of letters and media releases to various media outlets, in particular the Alexandra Standard. Several of our letters to the editor and opinion pieces have made it into The Age and The Weekly Times.

A selection of recent media pieces:

- Ann Jelinek's [How Forest Logging is Destroying Australia's environmental future](#), published in 'Independent Australia' (2 June 2019),
- Ken Deacon's [letter](#) to the Alexandra Standard (15 May 2019)
- Feature article on [Save Snobs](#) (in the Alex Standard, 17 July 2019);
- Letters published in The Age by Nick Jans, Elaine O'Shannessy and Rod Falconer

Our members are also active on Facebook and Twitter although our performance here could be improved.

## **10. Research**

Research, led by Nick Legge, has been a key activity for RFPG.

Our focus in the last year continues to be on the impact of intensified logging on the age class profile of the Rubicon's ash forests. In this work we have drawn upon publicly available data from VicForests and DELWP. See [RFPG research exposes looming threat to biodiversity](#) (30 June 2019).

Further research is currently underway to support our submission on VicForests' latest timber release plan.

## 11. Policy work

RFPG continues to monitor the forests policy environment and to formulate and advocate around policy directions which might contribute to a more responsible and sustainable management of Victoria's native forests.

See our overview of [Forest policy: recent and current initiatives](#) (27 March 2019).

Our broad policy platform is outlined in [Rescue the Rubicon](#) (from August 2017) and [Protect the Rubicon: a Roadmap for Forest Governance Reform](#) (6 September 2018).

VF continues to seek Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. The Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) [commented](#) in 2014: "FSC accreditation is widely recognized in the paper and printing industries and would allow VicForests to more effectively market its products to environmentally-conscious customers." Since then Bunnings has indicated it will require FSC certification.

RFPG provided a strong [submission](#) to the review by forest management consultants SCS in 2017 (which reported in May 2018). The SCS report identified a number of 'non conformances' (not conforming to the standards of the FSC).

In Jan 2019 VF wrote to stakeholders (including RFPG) acknowledging that:

*Major non-conformances were found in four of the 23 audited elements, and consequently VicForests did not attain the Controlled Wood standard. However, the process was critical to providing a clear focus on areas for change. The auditor identified the following areas for improvement:*

- *clearfell harvesting impacts on some high conservation values,*
- *the implementation of VicForests' High Conservation Values Strategy, and*
- *stakeholder engagement.*

*VicForests is heeding the results of that audit and moving rapidly to modify its approaches to harvesting practices to meet the necessary standards. In line with our continuous improvement, this is part of what we believe will be a better Victorian native harvesting operation.*

*To that end, we have completed internal planning and have begun reviewing and modifying our silvicultural methods to ensure demonstrable protection of High Conservation Values.*

*As this process evolves, we also seek to improve our stakeholder engagement through increasing opportunities for major stakeholders to provide input and to influence the direction of VicForests' forest management activities.*

RFPG responded substantively to this invitation reviewing our disappointing experience with respect to VF engagement and highlighting the importance of reviewing the code.



(Sept 2018).

## **12. Engagement with Murrindindi Shire Council**

RFPG [Submission to Murrindindi Shire Council](#) on forest tourism development (12 June 2019) urges, asked for the reinstatement of gravel road at the end of Cathedral Lane as Council's contribution to the proposed scenic loop drive from Cathedral Range State Park to Blue Range Road and back to the State Park via Tweed Spur Road.

For more detail refer to detailed submission. On 26 June Council resolved:

- That Council refer this item for consideration as part of submissions for the Tourism and Events Strategy.
- That subject to support and commitment from DELWP in relation to the broader touring route proposed, that Council investigate the case for upgrade of the eastern end of Cathedral Lane.

More recently we have approached Councillors with a recommendation that Ken Deacon should be appointed to whatever advisory committee Council might establish to promote and foster tourism in the Shire.

### **1. Collaboration with other groups**

We continue to collaborate with other groups working to save the forests of the Central Highlands, including Kinglake Friends of the Forest, WOTCH and Warburton Environment.



## How can I help?

1. Please join the RFPG (if you have not done so already).

Download and fill in the [membership application or renewal form](#) for 2020-21 and forward completed application to [admin@rubiconforest.org](mailto:admin@rubiconforest.org).

2. Please donate to the RFPG. Donations to the RFPG are tax deductible (form [here](#)). Please donate to:

Name: Rubicon Forest Protection Group Inc

BSB: 633000

Account number: 159830272

Please advise [admin@rubiconforest.org](mailto:admin@rubiconforest.org) of your donation!

3. Please encourage friends, family, neighbours etc to join RFPG (suggest they write to [admin@rubiconforest.org](mailto:admin@rubiconforest.org)). Come to our gatherings and forest tours.

4. Please explore our website - [rubiconforest.org](http://rubiconforest.org) - and let us know if there are areas of our work which you would particularly like to help with. Visit other [forest conservation websites](#) for further news and views.

5. Visit the Rubicon Forest to see for yourself the beauty and the damage.

6. Please help disseminate our messages via social media or simply talking to people about what is going on. Visit our Facebook page ([/rubiconforest](#)) and follow us on Twitter ([@RubiconForest](#)).

7. Email and ring your [political representatives](#) to make your concerns known to them.