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# The disappearing forests

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Sydney architect Ian Moore likes the feel of timber from Victoria's ash forests.

It's marketed as "Victorian Ash" or "Vic Ash" and sold by Australian Sustainable Hardwood (ASH).

"Ash is a really nice timber for me to use, which is similar to American oak and European oak," he says.

The blonde colour, according to Mr Moore, means it brings the warmth of wood without the orange or red hues that come with some other hardwoods.

Central to Ian Moore's work is sustainability and Victorian ash is pitched as "the most environmentally friendly building product available".

"When I first looked at it, you know, you read the material about sustainable logging... I would have said that it was a very good choice from a sustainable point of view," says Mr Moore.

Victorian ash is sourced from Victoria's lush native forests, logged by the state government-owned logging company VicForests, and processed at the Heyfield mill, which the government owns a 49 per cent stake in.

## 'Lawless' loggers

But only about 40 per cent of the trees taken from Victoria's native forests get turned into timber.

Most of the rest is pulped for paper and cardboard — also marketed as sustainable.

Despite being a for-profit company and receiving \$21 million in funding from the government, VicForests reported a \$4.7 million loss in its most recent annual report.

At the heart of VicForests's sustainability pitch is the claim that every tree they remove is grown back.

"We grow it back" is a motto on VicForests's website.

Off the back of that, they argue the wood they sell is "the ultimate renewable resource".

'Regenerating' logged forests like-for-like is a legal requirement. Failing to do so can be a criminal offence under Victoria's Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act.

But the ABC can reveal alarming evidence that logged forests aren't always being grown back, undermining the industry's claim to sustainability.

Sections of logged state forests have been classified as 'regenerated' despite not being so — and have been handed back to the public as little more than weed-infested fields.

Others, once majestic and carbon-dense mountain ash forests, are now thickets of wattle with hardly a eucalypt in sight.

Sarah Bekessy, a professor of sustainability at RMIT University says without growing back the eucalypts that were once there, the endangered animals that depend on them will suffer.

“Failing to regrow the forests and deliver those characteristics to species that depend on them will mean they’ll continue to decline,” she says.

The ABC can also reveal an official government investigation concluded that forests had not been regrown as required by the law — but decided it couldn’t take any action.

## VicForests accused of 'spying'



The ABC can reveal VicForests hired a private investigator to conduct surveillance on conservationists and, more recently, conducted what some have called "digital surveillance" on people the agency argues are trying to "discredit" it.

The revelations have sparked calls from conservation groups for VicForests to be shut down.

And they’ve left architect Ian Moore unlikely to source timber from Victoria’s native forests.

“I’m very concerned about what I’ve read,” he says.

A spokeswoman for Australian Sustainable Hardwood (ASH), which saws and sells Victorian Ash, says allegations like this “should be substantiated before reporting otherwise risks unfair trial by media against VicForests.”

VicForests denies the allegations, with a spokesperson telling the ABC: “VicForests regenerates all harvested forest for the future enjoyment of generations to come.”

This is the story of Victoria’s disappearing forests.



Stretching north east of Melbourne are the spectacular forests of Victoria, including those through the Central Highlands and Gippsland.

They contain some of the world's tallest trees and most carbon-dense forests

This area here, just an hour's drive from Melbourne, is the Toolangi State Forest.

Just inside the state forest, VicForests logged this area known as "Big Bull Fiddle" back in 2010.

Despite it being formally listed as 'regenerated' in 2019, which means the forest needed to be regrown like-for-like, more than a decade on the area is dominated by wattles, with barely a mountain ash in sight.

Wattles will never grow to the maturity needed to support animals like possums and gliders that need tree hollows.

Further east near Mount Delusion is a logged area — known as a 'coupe' — called "Grove's Gap".

It was logged in 2016 and determined to be properly regenerated by 2019, according to documents seen by the ABC.

Yet today, it's a far cry from the forest that once existed, and is now a weed-infested grassland. Even many of the seed trees that VicForests didn't log are now dead.

Less than a kilometre away is a coupe called Tom's Track. It was logged in 2011 and classified as regenerated four years later.

But a decade after logging, there is little sign of a forest here.

According to Margaret Blakers, who conducted an investigation into regeneration in Victoria, VicForests' claim that forests are grown back "like for like" is a "lie".

## Appearance versus reality

Margaret Blakers didn't mean to delve so deeply into VicForests' record on regeneration.

She's an independent researcher and conservationist. She was a founding member of the Victorian Greens and has campaigned for years to stop native forestry.

"What I was looking for was to see what happens after a forest is logged ... and I kind of stumbled on it," she says.

She saw a reference to reports the state-owned logging company was required to produce, but she couldn't find them.

So she began to demand the reports under Freedom of Information laws. As she collected them, a picture began to emerge.

According to the Victorian government, between 85 and 95 per cent of the time, areas are successfully regenerated within three years of being logged.

But among the documents collected by Ms Blakers were VicForests' own "finalisation lists" for areas logged between about 2013 and 2017.

In forestry jargon, a logged area (or coupe) is "finalised" once it has been logged and successfully regenerated. In order to be classed as regenerated, it needs to resemble the forest that was there before. It needs to be regrown to its pre-logged state, like for like.

Under the law, regeneration needs to return the "natural floristic composition" to the forest, including the correct mix of trees. In addition, specific numbers of those correct seedlings must be present in each hectare of land.

Contrary to the official claims, those documents Ms Blakers obtained showed 30 per cent of the logged areas weren't officially regenerated within three years. Looking at particular forest types, Ms Blakers found mountain ash forests failed to regenerate within three years about 50 per cent of the time.

A VicForests spokesperson said in a statement that forest regeneration "is an extensive and carefully managed process, which generally takes around three years to complete the replanting or reseedling."

Ms Blakers says the figures she discovered for the three-year regeneration failure rate were shocking.

"The government says no more than 15 per cent fail and need some kind of remedial treatment. We found twice that failure rate," Ms Blakers says.

But Ms Blakers wasn't satisfied with those official figures, and believes there is more to the story.

## Mount Delusion's disappearing trick

In 2017, long-time forest campaigner Ed Hill was looking at satellite imagery of Mount Delusion in Gippsland, when he noticed something unusual.

"You could see on Google Earth that there were just vast areas of what was once alpine ash forest that was failing to regenerate. It was like a moonscape," he recalls.

So he went and visited the area and it was worse than he expected.

"In some places you could walk for 100 metres and there wouldn't be a single tree. When it was a forest, there would have been hundreds of trees in that area."

Some of the areas, including one called "Tom's Track," were logged years earlier, in 2010 and 2011.

Tom's Track had been considered regenerated by 2015 and officially handed back to the public.

When that happens, it is no longer considered the responsibility of VicForests.

And that was what Ed Hill says bothered him the most.

"The land that VicForests is logging is public land — it belongs to everyone — and [VicForests] basically get the right to log it, and then they have to regenerate it," he says.

"They're meant to put the forest back. And once that occurs, the land is handed back to the state — back to the people of Victoria."

But without regrowing the forest, Ed says the practice is tantamount to stealing.

"They basically just robbed the landscape of the trees and then handed it back."

Ed and his fellow campaigners put in a complaint to the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) alleging the legal requirement to regrow the forest wasn't complied with.

The OCR investigated, and found there was no breach of the law, saying there was "no direct evidence ... the regeneration did not comply with the [legal] requirements."

But internal OCR documents obtained under Freedom of Information laws by Ms Blakers, did suggest the regeneration failed to comply with the law.

An internal Case Decision Record says that the regeneration outcomes there "do not meet prescriptions in the Code" and resulted in "large areas of fragmented habitat and canopy floristics vastly different to that prior to harvesting".

Despite that, the OCR concluded that since no harvesting operations were now occurring in those areas, they weren't able to give any orders to VicForests. Essentially, since the logging company had declared it "finalised", the regulator decided it had no power in relation to that coupe anymore.

In a statement, the OCR told the ABC it didn't find any evidence VicForests had failed to meet its legal requirements.

"The Conservation Regulator cannot take legal action in situations where evidence is not available to substantiate offending and criminal culpability cannot be determined," the spokeswoman said.

“Several confounding factors such as grazing by domestic cattle and non-native deer, as well as competition from dense grass cover and blackberry may have contributed to the regeneration outcomes after coupes were finalised.”

Ed Hill says that’s just ridiculous.

“It’s like third world land management practices, which just shows how completely unregulated the industry is,” he says.

## **Regeneration failure ‘often catastrophic’**

Partly motivated by what Ed Hill saw at Mount Delusion, and the concern that nobody was checking the state of regeneration, Margaret Blakers decided to see for herself.

She and a team of volunteers identified logged areas where they suspected regeneration had failed and visited them on foot. In some cases they used a drone to inspect them.

They visited more than 60 areas. According to Ms Blaker’s judgement, 44 had indeed failed to adequately regenerate, largely based on the density of eucalypts present.

Of those 44 coupes, all but 10 were officially listed as “finalised” — and so regarded by VicForests as being successfully regenerated.

“When coupes had not regenerated, the failure was obvious and often catastrophic,” said Ms Blakers.

Some areas she described as “extensive deforestation,” where what were once ash forests, were now “weed infested blackberry patches”.

Other areas had become dominated by shrubby natives — like wattles.

Others simply didn’t have adequate eucalypt density to be considered on par with the previous ecological function of the forest, according to Ms Blakers.

“They claim that they regrow forests after logging, like-for-like. That if you wait long enough you’ll get back a forest that resembled what was originally there in all cases. And the reality is that is not true. In other words, the logging is built on a lie.”

A VicForests’ spokesperson said in a statement: “VicForests regenerates thousands of stems per hectare. All VicForests regeneration operations are strictly conducted in line with the Code and Management Standards and Procedures (MSPs) for timber harvesting and are subject to the oversight by an independent regulator.”

Ed Hill is a long-time opponent of native forestry. But he says this is an issue that supporters of the industry should be angry about too.

“The definition of sustainability is all about sustaining a resource. This is the opposite of that,” he says.

“These forests could be cut again if they manage it properly. So it’s not just an environmental issue — they’re actually squandering a really valuable resource.”