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Should we bring back native forest logging? The answer is a clear no

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Native forest logging is economically costly, environmentally damaging and socially divisive, and should not be revived in Victoria or Western Australia or maintained in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland.

Recent commentary from pro-forestry advocates suggests that we should bring back native forest logging in Victoria and Western Australia and maintain it in Tasmania, New South Wales, and Queensland. They assert that the industry is, and could be, sustainable and believe that industrial logging operations are environmentally benign. Maintaining native forest logging is anything but sustainable, whether that be socially, economically, or environmentally. Similarly, logging operations are anything but benign – environmentally or economically. Native forest logging should not be maintained or brought back.

Native forest logging has been socially divisive in Australia for more than five decades. This is reflected by the fact that there has been an average of almost one major inquiry into the industry every year since the end of World War II.

In almost every one of these inquiries, findings suggest significant over-cutting of timber resources, a need for value-adding and using wood for things other than woodchips and paper pulp, and the non-trivial, often significant, environmental impacts of logging.

At the same time, the industry has campaigned vociferously for yet more investment in their unsustainable endeavours. These calls have succeeded and governments have poured money into the industry. Yet despite seemingly endless handouts totalling hundreds of millions of dollars from taxpayers and subsidies like royalty relief on carting logs from forests (including across Bass Strait to Victoria), the native forest logging industry continues to haemorrhage vast amounts of money.

It also continues to be overwhelmingly dominated by high volume, low value commodities like pulpwood and woodchips. This is relevant because the costs of cutting down native forests often far exceed the financial returns generated, while the financial risks and liabilities are ultimately borne by taxpayers. For example, the former state-owned logging business VicForests cut 22 million cubic metres of wood from Victorian public native forests between 2007 and 2024, yet paid only $4.5 million back as dividends to the Victorian government for cutting that wood despite receiving around $478 million income from the government over that time.

An industry that cannot survive without enormous amounts of taxpayer subsidies is anything but financially and economically sustainable. Indeed, many studies have now demonstrated that the native forest logging industry is a major financial burden on the taxpayer – a burden that Australians cannot afford in a cost-of-living crisis.

An important part of understanding environmental sustainability is the effect of resource extraction activities like logging on the key ecological processes which maintain the integrity of a forest. One of those processes in Australia is the fire regime. There is a natural fire regime for each type of forest – one with which a given forest ecosystem has evolved over hundreds of thousands if not millions of years. Yet there is now compelling scientific evidence from a range of independent studies that logging has altered the fire regime in a range of forest types by significantly increasing the risk of high-severity wildfire. These logging-generated fire effects have been rigorously documented in forests in Tasmania, Victoria, southern New South Wales, and northern New South Wales.

Altered fire regimes are not only detrimental for the forest (and its associated biodiversity), but they also substantially increase safety risks for rural and regional communities living near logged forests.

A further issue is the impact of altered fire regimes on wood supplies from native forests. It can take up to 80 years to grow a sawlog in a native forest, yet for some forest types, there is an 80 per cent chance they will be burnt in that time.

With such high fire risks, it is obvious that the native forest logging industry is a very poor financial investment. The effects of altered fire regimes on forest integrity, human safety, and wood supply further demonstrate that native forest logging is not sustainable. The added effects of climate change on fire regimes will make logging even less sustainable in the future.

Beyond the perennial financial problems of the native forest logging industry, even the seemingly simple process of regrowing trees after a forest has been cut down is becoming increasingly challenging. Our robust empirical scientific work has shown that regeneration failure, where forests fail to establish following logging, instead being replaced with scrub, is widespread and increasing after harvesting operations in places such as Victoria.

The problem is getting worse over time – but it would not be a problem if a forest was not logged in the first place. Logging operations that fail to regrow a forest, by definition, cannot be considered to be sustainable.

Natural resource industries like forestry depend on public support. Yet even major reports to government like the Timber Fibre Strategy clearly indicate that the native forest logging industry has lost its social license to operate with the public. The reality is that most Australians want an end to the native forest logging industry. They also want more National Parks – and for those protected areas to be properly funded and well managed.

Importantly, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that National Parks are critical for carbon storage, biodiversity conservation, and human health, and generate vast amounts of economic activity. Perhaps as telling is that the political architect of the Regional Forest Agreements in the former Howard Federal Government – ex-Senator Robert Hill – declared in 2023 that he supported the end of native forest logging in Australia.

The answer to our question about whether native forest logging should be brought back is a clear no. Australia cannot afford to continue to prop up such an economically and environmentally unsustainable industry. The industry should stay permanently closed in Victoria and Western Australia and quickly terminated in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland. The country should be sourcing its timber from plantations.

The views expressed in this article may or may not reflect those of Pearls and Irritations.

David Lindenmayer

Professor David Lindenmayer is a distinguished Australian scientist and academic, specialising in landscape ecology, conservation, and biodiversity. His research focuses on integrating nature conservation with agricultural production, improving biodiversity conservation in forestry and plantations, and enhancing fire management practices. With over 1000 peer-reviewed papers and 50 books, David is one of the most published ecologists globally. He leads large-scale, long-term research programs in south-eastern Australia. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, he has received numerous prestigious awards, including the ESA Whittaker Award, multiple Eureka Prizes, and the Australian Natural History Medal.

Chris Taylor

Dr Chris Taylor is an environmental scientist and researcher with a strong focus on landscape ecology, forest management, and conservation. With a background in studying the impacts of land use on biodiversity, Chris has contributed significantly to our understanding of how human activities affect natural ecosystems. His work often involves collaborations with Indigenous communities and other stakeholders to develop sustainable land management practices. Chris is known for his dedication to preserving Australia's unique environments, particularly in the context of climate change and habitat loss, and has published extensively in the field of environmental science.

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