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Yes, we can protect forests and profit from them

Environmental protections and commercial activity are not mutually exclusive

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Pexels

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With forests, as with water, fish and even farmland and minerals, Australian governments have become experts at preventing natural resources from being used to generate income.

In this, they have been supported by swathes of Australian academia and government environmentalists whose ‘groupthink’ tends to see the eviction of human activities as the key to a better future.

In fact, environmental benefits, as valued by most people, have always co-existed with the economic use of nature’s bounty.

Environmental management via commercial activity is an essential antidote to natural disasters in feeding and housing us as well as helping maintain the environmental benefits. In the case of forests, where timber-harvesting is in place, there is both an incentive to control conflagrations and the facilities to do so: roads, heavy machinery, firefighting skills.

Robert Onfrey points out that establishment environmentalists often regard non-intervention as a neutral baseline against which they can measure and control the effects of human activity. But the absence of forest management has consequences that almost everyone considers deleterious. It is well understood that Australia's current forest and ecological complexion was heavily influenced by Aboriginal intervention, which, like that of the activities of all other peoples, was oriented towards making the land more productive.

Australia has never been heavily forested. At the time of European settlement, forests/woodland comprised about 30 per cent of the continent (230 million hectares) and were already declining, partly due to Indigenous 'fire-stick farming'. In the 19th Century and into the 1990s, the nation's forest area fell (due to land clearing rather than timber harvesting) to under 130 million hectares. Over more recent years, it has increased slightly.

As a result of cumulative regulatory restraints on timber-harvesting, domestic production has flagged. Australian government policy is progressively eliminating logging of the natural forest. Timber imports now more than double the value of exports and make up 70 per cent of timber used in Australia. Twenty-five years ago, production from native forests was over 10 million cubic metres; today it is less than a quarter of that, despite expansion of the forest area.

Log production (Million cubic metres)

Year	Public/state native hardwood	Public/state native softwood	Plantation hardwood	Plantation softwood
2025	2.3	0.1	6	14.4
2001	10.5	0.3	1.5	12.5
1975	8	–	–	3
1950	10.5	–	–	–

Australia's policy of preventing timber harvesting from natural forests contrasts with that of major world timber suppliers. Almost all of Canada's timber is from natural forests, as is Russia's. Timber production in the US and Germany is also mainly from natural forests, while Scandinavia's timber is almost entirely harvested from managed, cyclical clear-felling of natural forest and replanting.

Australia's ever-shrinking ability to harvest the continent's wood resources is set to take another hit. Alpine ash forests in mainland Australia are proposed (by a committee exclusively composed of academics and with no foresters) to be listed as an Endangered Ecological Community under the *Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Conservation (EPBC) Act*. This would prevent logging of these forests.

Alpine ash forests cover about 720,000 hectares. The EPBC Committee recommended that these forests be listed as endangered and recognised this is a similar level to that of pre-European settlement but also claimed that these forests have become 'immature' as a result of fires.

There are also moves to have the 180,000 hectares of mountain ash forests listed as endangered; these also have shown little change since European settlement. In both cases, the land on which they grow is relatively unsuited to agriculture.

Harvesting these forests also provides environmental benefits by supplementing fire control, which is inevitably inadequate when left solely to government agencies. Inquiries, including the 2009-10 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, following catastrophic fires have invariably advocated burning 5 per cent of the forested area annually to prevent these; yet, in the eastern states we have seen only 0.2-1 per cent per year actually burned in such a managed way.

In fact, copses of the mainland alpine ash ecological community showing immaturity are those that have been repeatedly burnt in high-severity fires before reaching seed-bearing age. These are best managed through logging and active restoration, including controlled burns and aerial reseeding in the areas where they grow.

But the environmental lobby has been successful in persuading the public that commercial use of these assets approaches the sacrilegious.

In the Victorian election, no political party advocates commercial use of the native forests.

The Greens (predictably) seek to prevent all timber harvesting of the forests. The Greens also oppose burning of long unburnt areas (a recipe for catastrophic fires), and stipulate a major role for indigenous people, possibly thinking they might be familiar with the practices of their forebears 250 years ago! The ALP policy is similar.

The Coalition and One Nation at least favour more active fuel management, but their policy on native timber use is confined to thinning and selective harvesting, with protections for old growth.

The state forests offer income-earning opportunities to thousands of people and immense national benefits. Notwithstanding evidence from human and natural interface ranging from European and Asian farming to Aboriginal land use, many policy makers and influencers will torture the data to arrive at incorrect conclusions about the ability of pastoral economic activity to actually benefit the environment as humans see it.

As a nation, we must use the natural resources we have inherited, while also protecting them. The US, Canada, Russia and Sweden, all with extensive natural forests, have shown how to do this.

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