

Protecting Rocky Outcrops from What?

(The Pitfalls of “Environmental” Activism and Citizen Science)

Anti-logging protestors in Tantawangalo State Forest claim that NSW Forestry Corporation is destroying habitat of rare plants and animals by not maintaining ‘buffers’ of trees and shrubs around rocky outcrops. In fact, encroachment of trees and shrubs has been destroying habitat for centuries since Aboriginal burning was disrupted.

The controversy around rocky outcrops clearly illustrates how unscientific, illogical and environmentally destructive regulations can be, when they are used to strangle sustainable use of natural resources. Green Tape is equally as bad for our environment as for our socioeconomic health.

Special things live on rocky outcrops because outcrops are rare. They were specialised habitats under Aboriginal management because they were immune to burning, ‘buffered’ by open grassy surroundings maintained by frequent mild fire. On 8th May 1846, Surveyor General Mitchell ascended Mt. Abundance in the midst of Queensland’s Fitzroy Downs – “fine open country ... intersected by river lines from the north, distinguishable by columns of smoke” (from Aboriginal fires), and he wrote:

although the surface to near the top was tolerably smooth, and the bush open, I was met there by rugged rocks, and a scrub of thorny bushes so formidable as to tear leathern overalls, and even my nose. ... The trees and bushes there were different from others in the immediate vicinity, and, to me, seemed chiefly new. It is, indeed, rather a curious circumstance, but by no means uncommon, that the vegetation on such isolated summits in Australia, is peculiar and different from that of the country around them. Trees of a very droll form (bottle trees) chiefly drew my attention here.

Environmental bureaucracies in Australia generally subscribe to the Wilderness Myth that man has no place in the natural environment. They seek to protect rare habitat by excluding human activity and adding an arbitrary buffer around it. In doing so, they actually blur the differences that distinguish the special habitat and remove its natural protection.



Streaked Rock Orchid -Dendrobium striolatum

Now so-called buffers around rocky outcrops are actually wicks that allow common trees and shrubs and litter and high intensity fires to encroach on special habitats at the expense of their

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specialised biota. For example, after twenty years of fire exclusion from a National Park in southwestern Australia, a single wildfire in 2003 devastated all the monadnocks (granite outcrops) that formerly harboured rare species, throughout 18,000 hectares of forest.

Loss of bare rocky habitat by woody encroachment, accumulation of litter, and shading is more insidious but equally damaging as destructive fires. Australia's rarest snake has disappeared from Ku Ring Gai National Park and is declining in Morton National Park because its basking habitat has been lost to scrub in the absence of burning.



Rocky Outcrop – Too Many Trees and Too Much Flammable Litter

One of Australia's rarest eucalypts – the Mt. Imlay mallee – is dying out because the tree has taken over its habitat after sixty years without burning. Ironically, it cuts both ways. One of our worst native weeds in southeastern Australia was confined to deep dark gullies and low rocky outcrops by Aboriginal burning. Now pittosporum is taking over the landscape from Brisbane to Adelaide and down to Hobart.

Rocky outcrops provide fruitful grounds for unproductive debate amongst green militants, environmental bureaucrats and foresters because they all don't really understand what they're supposed to be protecting and are therefore unable to define its extent, let alone justify any arbitrary width of 'buffer' on scientific grounds.

Anti-loggers are happy because their goal is really to disrupt use of natural resources rather than to protect rare species or communities. The more entangled the Green Tape, the better. Debate has focused on regulation and compliance or otherwise, because biodiversity is not the issue. No plant or animal has been identified as threatened by the alleged breaches of regulations and no one has questioned the scientific basis for the rules, nor the environmental outcomes of compliance or non-compliance.

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Vic's career includes working as a forester, research scientist, manager and silviculturist. Since retiring in 2012, he has given evidence before 3 parliamentary inquiries into land and fire management and written a book, *Firestick Ecology: fardinkum science in plain English*. He continues to campaign for commonsense management of forest ecology.

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