

National Parks are not our Salvation.

Two centuries ago in Australia we had sustainable land management, world class fire management practices and abundant biodiversity.

What happened? Very quickly Aboriginal land management skills and knowledge disappeared; our control over fire was lost and we introduced plants and animals that became widespread pests. As our population grew much of our native vegetation was cleared for the production of food and fibre and most of what remained was left unmanaged.

The combined effect of these things had a major impact on our biodiversity - the greatest being west of the Dividing Range with the extinction of the majority of our small ground dwelling mammals including the iconic bilby, numbat, and brush-tailed bettong.

To stem the decline in biodiversity we introduced a complex web of tenure based legislation. Tenure is a legal concept rather than a best-practice management method. It means that public native forests have been classified as National Parks, State Forests or Crown Land.

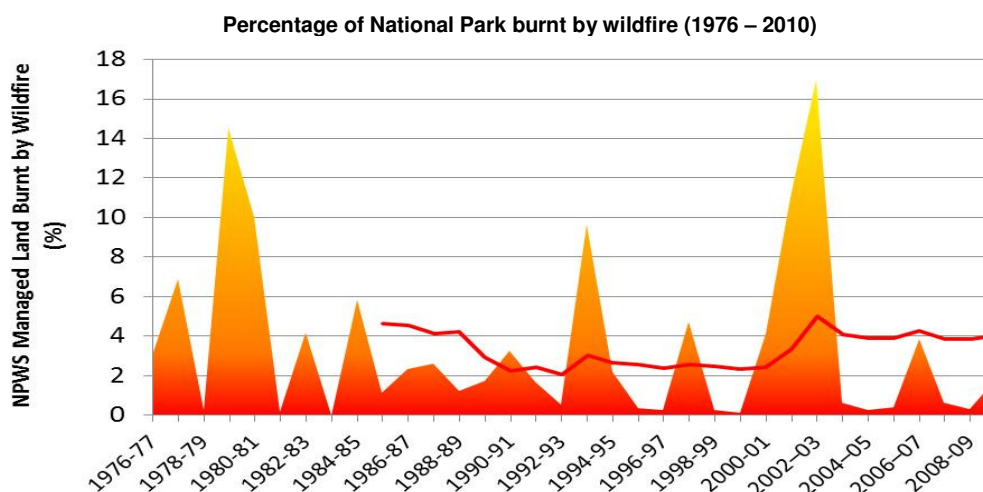
As NSW is the most heavily regulated forest environment it provides an insight into the problem. For example its native forests are governed by around 50 Acts of Parliament, 5 State ministerial portfolios and 12 Government Agencies. Early on this system seemed to work, supporting improved knowledge and development of specialised forest management skills. However the tenure system offers no broad landscape management and accountability.

Tenures have always been ripe for political opportunism. Over a ten year period in NSW a previous Premier claimed to save the forests by relabelling 350 parcels of State forests and Crown Land as National Parks and directing the majority of all public land management spending into their promotion and management. City dwellers were convinced that the forests were saved and that a world class conservation reserve system had been created and he received some glittering international awards.

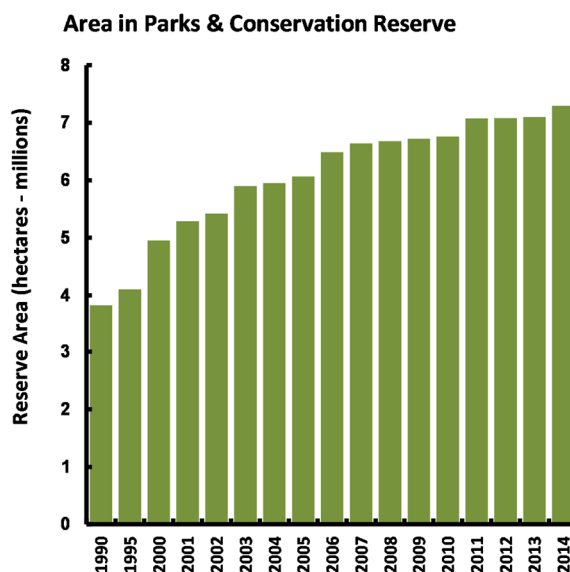
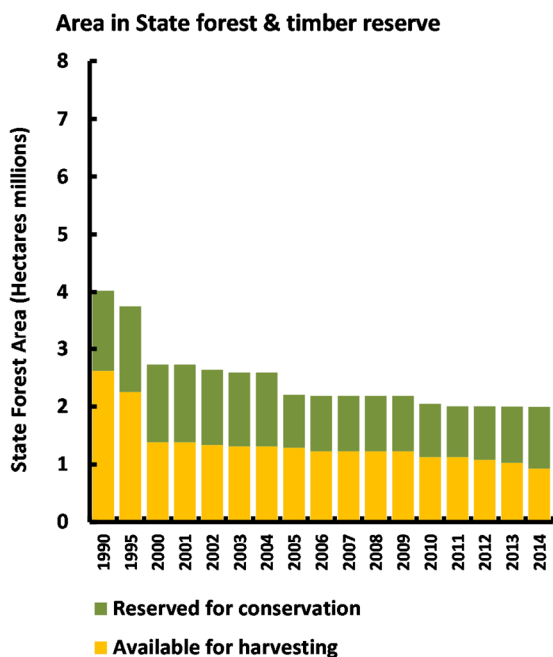
Back in the bush little changed, apart from less timber harvesting. Pests and weeds continued to run rampant. The government regulators of pests and weeds remained focused on agriculture and the public forest agencies were left to manage their own estates.

Altered fire regimes are a major threat to biodiversity. Government spending on forest fire management is at an all-time low while the cost of fire emergency management has reached record highs. Wildfires are now seen as the norm despite being mostly caused by humans.

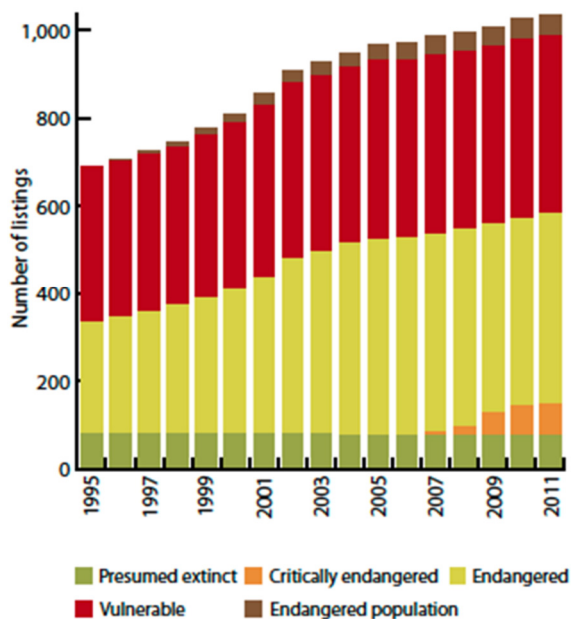
When the latest mega-fire threatens life and property we take comfort in the words of our decorated fire commissioners with sirens, flashing lights and footage of water bombers in the background and the ever present politician looking gravely at the fire. There is little consideration of the impacts on our wildlife nor do we question whether the catastrophe could have been avoided through well planned hazard reduction on the forest floor.



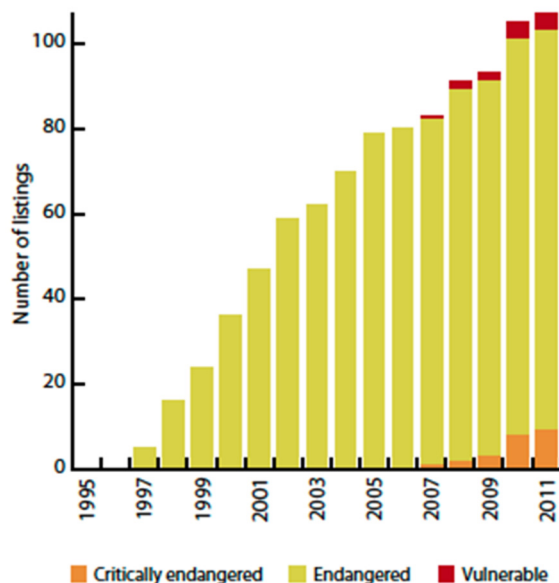
National Parks alone won't prevent the decline in biodiversity. In NSW there are 7.3 million hectares of National Park & Reserves which equates to 9.2% of the State. These areas cost approximately \$415M or \$55 per hectare on average to manage each year. In the last thirty years billions of dollars have been used to expand them mainly on the coast.



Threatened species



Threatened ecological communities



In looking at the graphs above why is no-one asking the obvious question. As we have decreased dramatically the area of forest available for harvesting Graph 1) and placed it into national parks and conservation reserves (graph 2) , the number of critically endangered, endangered and vulnerable species has rapidly increased (graph 3) and threatened ecological communities are similarly rapidly increasing (graph 4). What is happening on the over 7 million hectares of national parks to lead to such a demise that the less than 800,000 hectares used for forestry are needed? State forests have more records of threatened species and threatened ecological communities mapped and registered because harvesting requires them to be identified and preserved.



A single landscape model would provide improved accountability supported by a landscape scale monitoring and reporting system. This cannot be achieved without making changes to a state's existing tenure system. It's time for some broad holistic thinking. Look at the success of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy which as a not-for-profit private organisation that is leading the way in biodiversity conservation in dryland areas. They have full accountability and are a low cost outcome based organisation achieving results in pest and weed control, effective fire management and effective results in threatened species restoration.

Native forests are dynamic- evolving with fire, drought and floods and are not static museums that can be locked up forever. Using preventative measures like ecological thinning and fire mitigation, the timber industry can play an important role in active, adaptive management to tackle common threats across all tenure types.

Active working forests are considered normal and ecologically acceptable in most places around the world. For example the famous Black Forest in Germany is a working forest. Most of the Canadian and US forests are actively managed and selectively harvested. The timber industry requires long term sustainable forests in order to remain part of the economy and remember many of those in the timber industry are generations of families many of whom have been working in the forest they love for more than 140 years.

River Red Gum Forests NSW

In the River Red gum forests around Mathoura in NSW is a family still working the forests today and that family was among the first settlers on a 4000 acre settlement lease chosen because it had no trees and was deep in grass – perfect for farming in the latter half of the 1800s. Red Gums wherever found were classified as an invasive weed and were prolific after floods whereby the local indigenous communities kept them suppressed by undertaking traditional burning practices.

That same family were the first to actively cultivate the red gum forests in the late 1800s for timber harvesting and those red gums were in an area now occupied by the Gulpa, Moira and Barmah Forests that when surveyed by the NSW government surveyor Thomas Townsend in 1848 was described and mapped as open plains, sand hills and reed beds – no trees. His survey maps exist today in the NSW Government Archives.

Claims made back in 2009/10 that those forests were over 5000 years old and the last of their kind were spurious, unscientific and formed part of a highly political campaign to lock up those forests and make them national park. Much of the historical evidence and records existing on the forests were ignored. Today that national park has diminishing visitation, the local towns like Mathoura that had flourished even in drought with a viable timber industry, have been left with major closures of retail and shopping strips, closure of hotels and B&B operators increased unemployment particularly for the local indigenous community and declining prosperity for their local communities. That is why the local councilors and elected officials are campaigning for a return to a carefully managed production forest.

Towards 2050

Finally on the economic side of the ledger, as the population grows, the challenge ahead is the forest industry working with the construction industry as an efficient supply chain to provide local timber to meet the growing demand for affordable housing. The prediction is over 660,000 new homes in NSW alone by 2031. A reinvigorated, innovative hardwood and softwood timber industry will also be well placed to play a leading role in the cellulose economy, with new products such as CLT (cross-laminated timber) just the start of exciting innovation in the sector.

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