

Tombstone Creek- 2003/2006/2015

These photographs provide a snapshot of Tasmanian forestry. They are taken within 100 meters of each other at Coupe RS142E in the upper catchment of Tombstone Creek, northeast Tasmania. Tombstone Creek is a headwater tributary of the upper South Esk River, part of Launceston's water supply.

2003.

Tombstone Creek was an extraordinarily beautiful forest of 400 year old myrtle and blackwood, tree-ferns up to eight meters high and some of the largest sassafras in Tasmania. Occasional tall eucalypt emergents towered above the rainforest canopy.

2005/2006.

The forest was clear-felled by cable logging in the summer of 2005 and burnt to mineral earth in a very hot fire in April 2006. All of the rainforest trees were killed outright. The soil is granitic, steep and sandy, and the slope was left in a condition vulnerable to severe erosion. The only rainforest that escaped the logging and burning was a narrow riparian strip at the lower edge of the coupe. The clearfall and burn process, standard practice for such forest, released approximately 20,000 tonnes CO₂, as calculated from a 2001 study by Forestry Tasmania.

2015.

Nine years on there is a dense cover of thin-stemmed silver wattles (*Acacia dealbata*) and sparse eucalypts. Living rainforest trees are entirely absent from the site. The few sassafras stumps that remain are spongy and crumbling and will disappear entirely in the next year or two. Exotic weeds flourish around the edges of the coupe.

Outcomes.

The mature rainforest with tall eucalypt emergents has been wholly eliminated, converted to a spindly crop of wattle and occasional eucalypts. This outcome replicates that of adjacent and surrounding logged coupes. Rainforest recolonization from the remnant on Tombstone Creek will not occur due to the competitive advantage of the eucalyptus and wattles on the east-facing slope and planned subsequent logging and fire.

Wildlife has been devastated, hydrology of the water catchment altered, soil impoverished and the risk of wildfire massively increased through the establishment of the pyrogenic wattle and eucalypt thickets. Carbon that was previously sequestered within the soil and the living vegetation has been released to the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.

The slash and burn process at Tombstone Creek has been standard practice in Tasmania's wet forests since the 1970's, effectively eliminating the rainforest component in hundreds of thousands of hectares statewide. Millions of tonnes of rainforest timbers have been squandered in logging fires and as woodchips. Biodiversity has been diminished and forests locked into primitive regrowth ecologies dominated by colonising species.

At Tombstone Creek a beautiful rainforest has been turned into a congestion of woody weeds. The tragedy is that this is but one instance of the appalling impoverishment of Tasmania's ancient forests that has been brought about by forty years of industrial logging.