



Eastern boundary
of Errinundra National Park



Cleared paddock proposed for protection.

Flawed promises

Environmental Organisations' Investigation of Labor's 2006 Election Old Growth Forest Commitments



Stony Creek, boundary of Snowy River National Park



Bonang River, northern boundary of Errinundra National Park



Brown Mountain, East Gippsland



Ferntree Creek, eastern boundary of Errinundra National Park



Flawed promises

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Environmental Organisations' Investigation of Labor's 2006 Election Old Growth Forest Commitments

This investigation into the Victorian Government's commitment to protect 41,000 hectares of old growth forest was carried out by The Wilderness Society (TWS), the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) and the Australian Conservation Foundation.

Copies of the report are available at www.reports.vnpa.org.au. Released May 2009.





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Summary

More than two and a half years since the last state election, the Victorian Labor party has not delivered on its promise to protect the magnificent old growth forests of Victoria's East Gippsland. In total, Labor committed to protect 41,000 hectares of old growth and icon sites in 25 areas scattered across East Gippsland. While the 2006 old growth commitment fell well short of environment group expectations, it could, if delivered, make an important contribution to Victoria's reserve system.

Further investigation by environment groups revealed the commitment was even more disappointing. Forty per cent of the areas identified for protection were not old growth forest, nor were they threatened by the timber industry or useful for commercial logging. Meanwhile, the government, through its commercial logging agency VicForests has continued to log very high conservation value old growth forests including the iconic Brown Mountain.

Mature old growth eucalypt forests may contain individual trees of up to 500 years of age and more habitat features such as hollows, dead standing trees and logs than other growth stages and have not been subjected to unnatural disturbance such as logging, roading and clearing.

Old growth forests have key values that make them unique and critical for nature conservation including:

- Being an important and unique part of



Above, recent old-growth forest logging at Brown Mountain, and right, cleared paddock proposed for protection.

Victoria's natural heritage containing many of Australia's endemic plant and animal species and, as such, contain unique communities found nowhere else in the state.

- Include large old trees, many of which pre-date the first European arrival. These old trees include hollows that take over 100 years to form. Tree hollows are needed by 98 per cent of Victoria's animal species for shelter and breeding including the Lead-



beaters Possum, Long-footed Potoroo and Spotted-tailed Quoll. It has been found that many plants and animals simply do not come back after logging operations have taken place.

- Old growth forest also generates higher water yields (run-off) compared to re-growth forests and are important carbon stores.



- Old growth forests are spectacularly beautiful and highly prized by visitors and tourists.

In the last few weeks of the 2006 state election campaign, Labor released its Victoria's National Parks and Biodiversity Policy. The policy committed Labor to:

1. "...immediately protect the Goolengook Block and the last significant stands of Victoria's old growth forests currently available for logging under the National Parks Act. In total this will add almost 33,500 hectares of forest to the National Parks and reserve system".
2. "...create the Great Victoria Alpine National Park by adding a 5000 hectare section of state forest, currently available for logging, to link the Errinundra National Park to the Snowy River and Alpine parks and bid for World Heritage Listing".
3. "Immediately add over 2500 hectares of icon state forest areas currently available for timber harvesting to the national parks and reserve system in East Gippsland."
4. "Create a new tourism opportunity the Great Short Walks of East Gippsland" including an "Old Growth Walk near Goongerah".

The total area identified was 41,000 ha, when all the commitments are added up.

Table 1: Area of Labor 2006 Election Commitments

Labor 2006 Election Commitments	Hectares (ha)
Old Growth (including Goolengook Block)	33,500 ha
Link between Snowy River & Errinundra National Park	5000 ha
Icon State Forest/Rainforest sites	2500 ha
TOTAL	41,000 ha

In a map released along with the election policy, the government identified 25 sites for new protected areas across East Gippsland totalling 41,000 hectares. On-ground investigations by environment groups in 2008 found that of the 41,000 hectares almost 40 per cent is not old growth and of no commercial value to the logging industry. Some of the areas identified included previously cleared areas and others exhibiting post logging regeneration failure. These are summarised below and documented in detail with photographs in the bulk of this report.

On the other side of the coin, while promises were made to protect areas clearly not mature wet old growth eucalypt forests, a whole series of areas that are clearly old growth are being logged or scheduled to be logged including Brown Mountain, Yalmy Rd, East Errinundra, Bonang River, Survey Rd, Ba Creek and Stony Creek. These sites are documented in sections 3 and 4 of this report.

Table 2: Proposed areas not old growth forests

Area 1 – Timber River North	Dry western facing foothills on very rocky terrain. No commercial logging value.
Area 3, 4, 5 – Breakfast, Boggy and Yellow Waterholes creeks	Tiny isolated pockets of shrubby dry forest, including largely burned areas from 1980s, cleared land and logging coupe from 2006.
Area 6 – Mt Stewart	Grassy and shrubby dry forest, including a large weed-infested, cleared felled "cow paddock", large areas that were prescribed burned in the 1990s and 2007. No commercial logging value.
Area 8 – Mt McLeod	Grassy and shrubby dry forest including large areas with very little undergrowth, subjected to large prescribed burns. No commercial logging value.
Area 9 – Tara Range	Shrubby dry forest, no commercial logging value.
Area 10 – Wombat Creek	Lowland forest on sandy soils containing no old growth forests.
Area 21 – Combienbar	Tiny isolated pockets of western facing, mainly dry forest surrounded by logged and cleared land. Makes little ecological connectivity sense.
Area 22 – Lower Cann River	Mainly coastal heathland forest, with very significant old trees, no commercial logging value.

Another clear commitment in Labor's 2006 election policy was the development of an "Old Growth Forest Walk" near Goongerah.

Locals have spent many years surveying a track through the giant forests at Brown Mountain north of Goongerah. Unfortunately half of the site has now been logged and a second two coupes are still scheduled to be completed. This site is documented in section 5 of the report.

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), The Wilderness Society (TWS) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) have been working on a revised reserve design that has now been presented to the government. The proposal equates to 41,000 hectares of old growth forest removed from logging, or approximately 52,400 hectares if existing protected areas (Special Protection Zones & Code exclusions) are included. A map of this proposal can be found on page seven of this report.

This reserve design:

- Maximises areas of old growth (based on modelling from the Department of Sustainability and Environment and environment group investigations).
- Maximises ecological connectivity to existing parks, which helps with park management and ecological resilience in the face of climate change.
- Delivers on government commitments for

protecting old growth forest currently available for logging.

It is clear from the investigation that the maps released at the last election were based on flawed ecological advice and failed to deliver the letter, spirit and intent of the government's announcement. It is unclear however if this was done on purpose or was a mistake. What is clear is the government needs to act to rectify the mistakes and deliver on its promise.

Further work has now been done to identify key areas of old growth that should be quarantined from further logging via a moratorium until they can be protected in the reserve system.

Key Recommendations:

- Immediately release plans to protect 41,000 hectares of the real "... last significant stands of Victoria's old growth forests currently available for logging" as promised at the 2006 election.
- Place a moratorium on old growth logging until the reserve proposal is in place.
- Stop logging at Brown Mountain and include in revised park proposal.
- Deliver commitment to old growth walking track and invest funds in East Gippsland to deliver the track.



1. Background

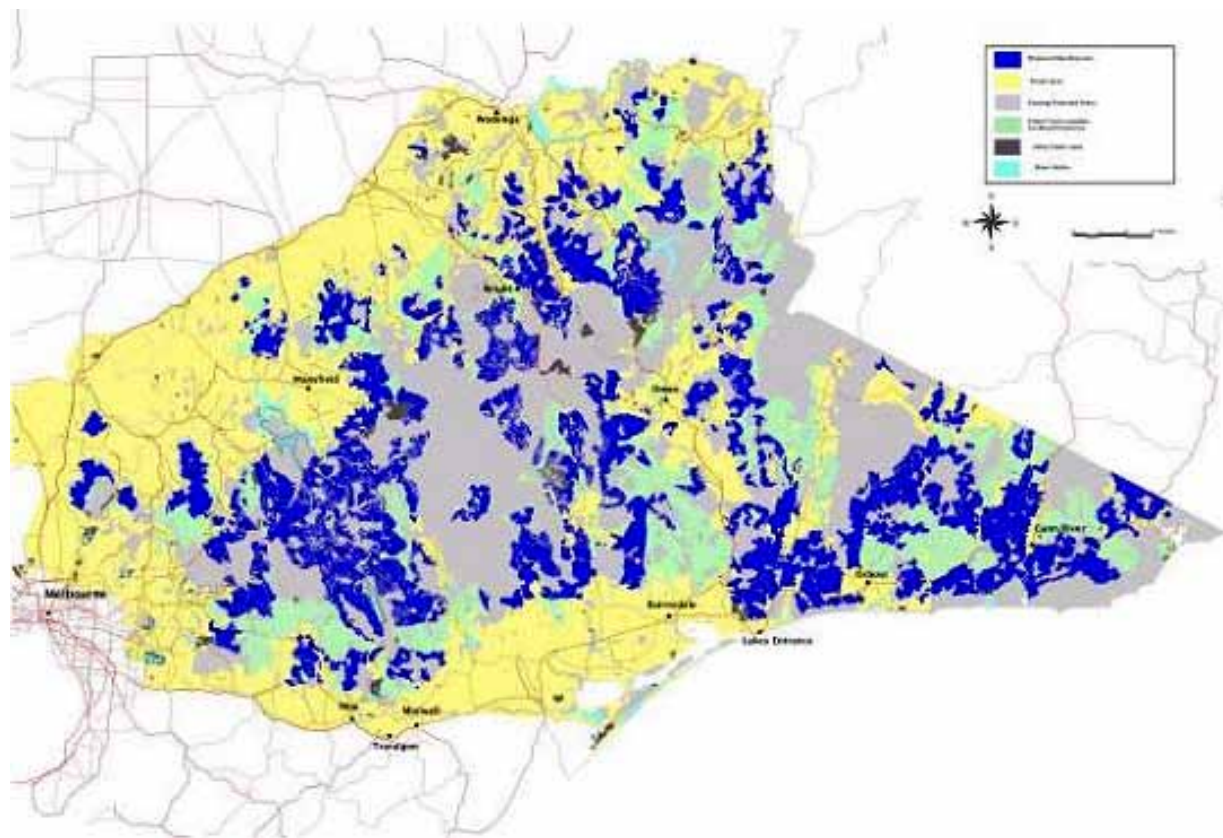
For many years leading up to the Victorian election in 2006, an alliance of Victorian environment groups worked cooperatively to propose an area of high conservation value forests for protection from logging and woodchipping.

In June 2006, the report *Choosing a Future for Victoria's Forests* was produced, which advocated the protection of 977,000 hectares of old growth forests, water catchments and habitat for endangered species. This followed extensive on-ground survey work, analysis of forest data provided by government, scientific input and consultation concerning areas of special value to the Victorian community.

In a time of climate change, protection of a connected network of native forests is crucial to ensure the survival of some of Victoria's most endangered species.

Map 1 depicts the high conservation value forests that were proposed for protection by environment groups to help fight climate change, secure our water catchments and protect endangered species from extinction.

Recognising the strong community expectation that old growth forests should be protected, on November 17, 2006 – one week out from the Victorian state election – Labor committed to protecting 33,500 hectares of the last significant stands of Victoria's old growth forests available to the timber industry. In addition to this, 7500 hectares of icon forests would be protected, totalling 41,000 hectares of forests to be protected



Map 1. Environment group's 2006 proposal for Forest Reserve System.

that were previously available for logging.

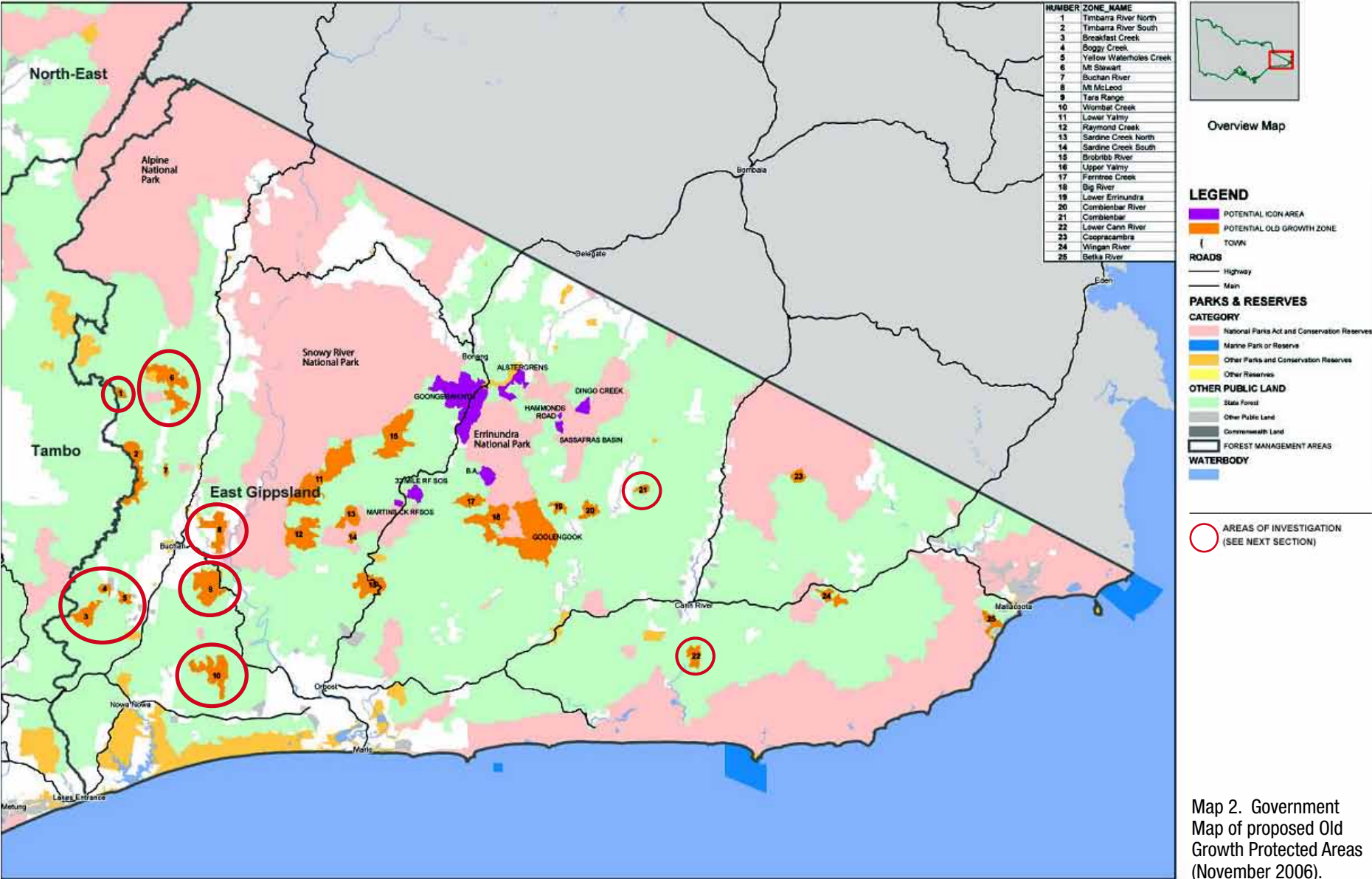
The Labor announcement equated to approximately 4 per cent of the forests environment groups had proposed for protection.

With the launch of its policy to protect old growth forests, Labor published a document as part of its election commitments. The docu-

ment "Labor protects last significant old growth stands" is available on Labor's website at www.alpvictoria.com.au under the Policies and Platforms tab.

Included in the policy is a commitment to develop an old growth walking track near Goongerah in East Gippsland.

Flawed promises





Map 2 depicts the areas of forest that were proposed by government to be protected as old growth forest and icon forest areas in East Gippsland.

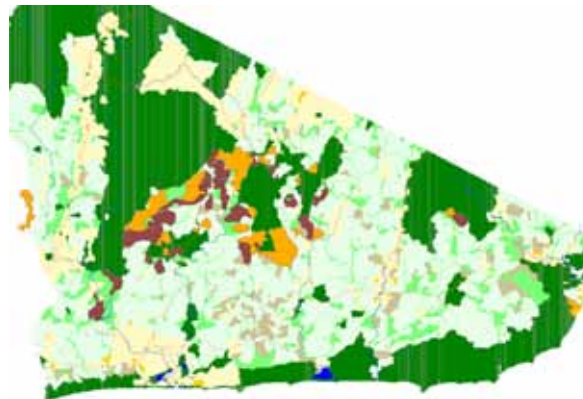
Following the 2006 election, environment groups conducted extensive on-ground surveys of the areas proposed for old growth forest protection. Of the 33,500 hectares, almost 40 per cent is not old growth and of no commercial value to the logging industry. This investigation reveals that many of these areas and the current lines on maps are starkly inconsistent with Labor's election policy.

Environment groups spent many months putting together a proposal that would deliver on Labor's election commitment – a proposal that makes ecological sense. Map 3 depicts the areas of forest for which protection would deliver on the commitment. This area includes Brown Mountain, where highly controversial logging is currently being undertaken by VicForests.

Map 3 also shows the revised reserve design produced by environment groups, which equates to 41,000 ha of old growth forest removed from logging, or approximately 52,400 ha if existing protected areas (Special Protection Zones & Code exclusions) are included.

This reserve design:

- Maximises areas of old growth (based on modeling from DSE and environment



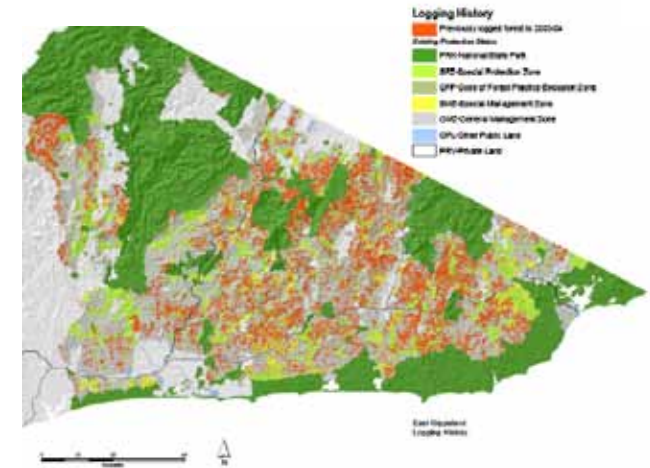
Map 3. Alternative Environment Group Reserve Design (2008 – 2009).

group investigations).

- Maximises ecological connectivity to existing parks, which helps with park management and ecological resilience in the face of climate change.
- Delivers on government commitments for protecting old growth forest currently available for logging.

Environment groups have been in dialogue with the state government for over 12 months on this issue, and are still yet to receive a detailed response on the delivery of the commitment.

It is important to bear in mind just how much of East Gippsland has been logged. It is important to understand that in Victoria, 92 per cent of original forests from 1750 have disappeared or have been severely altered. Logging is one



Map 4. Logging History of East Gippsland.

activity that has degraded the environmental values of our forests. Map 4 depicts a history of logging in East Gippsland (orange represents forests logged in the past three decades). The map shows the increased fragmentation of forest, particularly concentrating on the boundaries of the current national park reserve system.

The following pages document the results of this investigation.

The final announcement on old growth forest protection in East Gippsland has not yet been released. There is still time to alter the current proposals to ensure that the intent of Labor's policy is met.

Environment groups would welcome changes to the maps to ensure old growth forests are truly protected for the benefit of future generations.

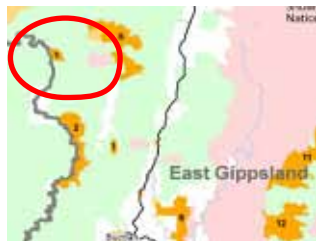
Flawed promises

2. Forests scheduled to be protected that are not old growth forests



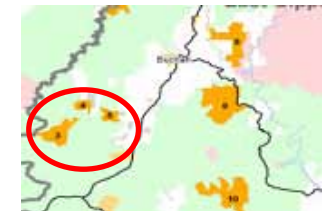
Labor Proposed Area 1 – Timber River North

Dry western facing foothill forests on very rocky terrain. No commercial logging value.



Labor Proposed Areas 3, 4, 5 – Breakfast, Boggy and Yellow Waterholes Creeks

Tiny isolated pockets of Shrubby dry forest, including largely burned areas from 1980s, cleared land and logging coupe from 2006.



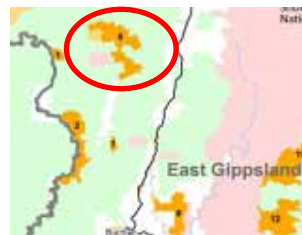


“Cattle on Road” sign on Glenmore Road.



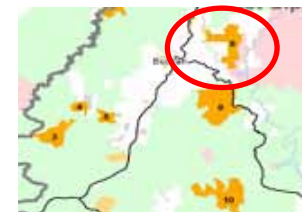
Labor Proposed Area 6 – Mt Stewart

Grassy Dry and Shrubby Dry forest, including a large weed infested cleared field, large areas that were prescribed burned in the 1990s and 2007. No commercial logging value.



Labor Proposed Area 8 – Mt McLeod

Grassy Dry and Shrubby Dry forest, including large areas with very little undergrowth subjected to large prescribed burns. No commercial logging value.

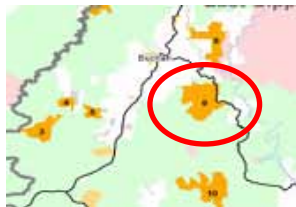


Flawed promises



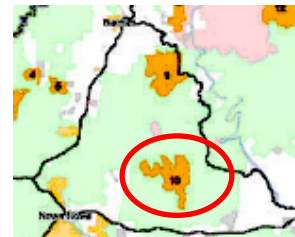
Labor Proposed Area 9 – Tara Range

Shrubby Dry forest, including large areas with very little undergrowth subjected to large prescribed burns in the 1990s. No commercial logging value.



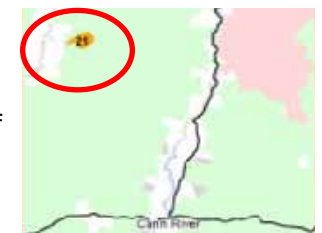
Labor Proposed Area 10 – Wombat Creek

Lowland forest on sandy soils containing no old growth forests. Of little or no commercial logging value.



Labor Proposed Area 21 – Combienbar

Tiny isolated pocket of western facing, mainly dry forest surrounded by logged areas and cleared land. Makes little ecological connectivity sense.

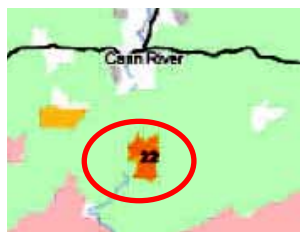




**Labor Proposed
Area 22 –
Lower Cann River**

Mainly coastal heath-
land forest on very
sandy soils, largely
burnt with very few
significant old trees.

No commercial logging value.



Flawed promises

3. Old growth forests currently scheduled to be logged

These images show example areas of old growth forests currently in Timber Release Plans and scheduled to be logged.



Brown Mountain

Brown Mountain is an area of iconic old growth forests immediately adjacent to Errinundra National Park. It has been listed on the National Estate, contains habitat for rare and endangered species including the Long-footed Potoroo, the Orbost Spiny Crayfish and is home to trees over 500 years old.



36 Mile Track

Ancient cool temperate rainforest occurs in the tall wet forests along 36 Mile track. It is home to the Long-footed Potoroo, one of our rarest and most endangered mammals.





East Errinundra

Quintessential old growth forest containing cool temperate rainforest draping off the eastern slopes of the Errinundra Plateau.



Aspen Battery Track

There are a few remaining giant stands of trees in the wet forests along Aspen Battery Track, adjacent to Errinundra National Park. Much logging has taken place in the this area, highlighting the need to protect what is left.



Yalmy

This giant stand of wet forest contains some of the most easterly extent of Mountain Ash forests in the world.

The genetic makeup of forests are most precious on the extremes of their range. Contains very high densities of arboreal mammals.

Left, one of the giant Mountain Ash trees in a planned logging coupe off Yalmy Rd. This giant measures about 14 metres around at chest height.

Flawed promises

4. Current/recent logging of old growth forests



Bonang River (northern boundary of Errinundra National Park)

Ancient trees left on the ground to be burnt after logging adjacent to the Bonang River near Brown Mountain.



Survey Rd (middle 'hole' of Errinundra National Park)



BA Creek (western boundary of Errinundra National Park)



East Errinundra (eastern boundary of Errinundra National Park)



Stony Creek (boundary of Snowy River National Park)

VicForests old growth forest logging from early 2009.



Ferntree Creek (adjacent eastern boundary of Errinundra National Park)

This logging in old growth forest at Ferntree Creek shows unlawful logging of a creek bed.

Flawed promises



Brown Mountain

This is one of the most controversial logging areas in recent history. Recent carbon dating has revealed trees at Brown Mountain are over 550 years old. Brown Mountain was added to the logging schedule after Labor's old growth announcement, and logging began in October 2008.



5. Old growth forest walk near Goongerah election commitment

Another clear commitment in Labor’s 2006 election policy was the development of an “Old Growth Forest Walk” near Goongerah. Locals have spent many years surveying a track through the giant forests at Brown Mountain north of Goongerah.

In addition to the old growth promises the government made a commitment to establishing “Great Short Walks”. The policy states that, “these walks will make East Gippsland’s stunning natural environment accessible to more families and tourists, boosting the region’s income and visitation.” The policy further cites “Old Growth Walk – Goongerah” as one of these Great Short Walks.

The forests of this area – the Errinundra Plateau – are renowned for their grandeur and unparalleled botanic diversity. Brown Mountain itself forms the only forested link between the Snowy River and Errinundra national parks.

Brown Mountain was listed as a National Estate area by the Commonwealth Heritage Commission in the 1980s, meaning it has long been assessed as being of equal value as those forest landscapes gazetted in national parks. The summer of 1989-90 saw strong protests at the logging of these sites. There has been much community interest in these easily accessible old growth forests ever since.

Brown Mountain is on the edge of the Errinundra National Park and forms a link between the park and The Gap Scenic Reserve. This park’s man-



agement plan emphasises the need to manage adjoining areas sensitively, not least because the park’s irregular shape makes it very vulnerable to edge effects.

During the past seven years, the local East

Gippsland community, together with conservationists, have marked and mapped an old-growth forest walk on Brown Mountain, and have named it the “Valley of the Giants”. Immense, old growth trees have been individually

identified, mapped by GPS, and photographed as part of the long process to establish this walk. As such, the 2006 ALP policy commitment to provide significant funds for “Great Short Walks of East Gippsland” was welcomed.

Brown Mountain has been identified as the perfect site within proximity of Goongerah, with sufficient magnificent old-growth trees in succession, and with suitable terrain, to satisfy requisite criteria for a Great Short Walk. The design of the walk allows it to be accessible by road, and is around 6km in total length incorporating two loops, allowing walkers the choice of a longer, whole circle walk (1 hour +) or a shorter half loop (30 minutes). Either option would provide a unique old growth experience (see p21 map).

Logging has already commenced at the first of three coupes planned for Brown Mountain. The coupes compromise both the commitment to protecting significant stands of old growth forests and the development of tourism opportunities in this region through an old growth forest walk.

Old growth forest at Brown Mountain

Protection of this site would enable the development of a “Valley of the Giants” old growth forest walk near Goongerah, ensuring Labor’s commitment to this objective is met. Logging has commenced and the second coupe is still scheduled to be logged, even though a range of threatened species have been documented in the coupes by local environment groups.

Valley of the Giants Old Growth Forest Walk

Where is the walk?

The Valley of the Giants Old Growth Forest Walk is a one hour drive from Orbost. It is accessible from the Bonang Highway and just a short distance from the settlement of Goongerah. The entire walk is approximately six kilometres and has been broken into two loops to accommodate either a short or longer walk.

Partially logged and proposed coupes

There are three areas proposed for logging within the marked Old Growth Forest Walk. The first coupe, number 20, has been almost completely logged. However, the integrity of the walk can still be maintained if the rest remains unlogged and the two further coupes are permanently removed from logging plans.

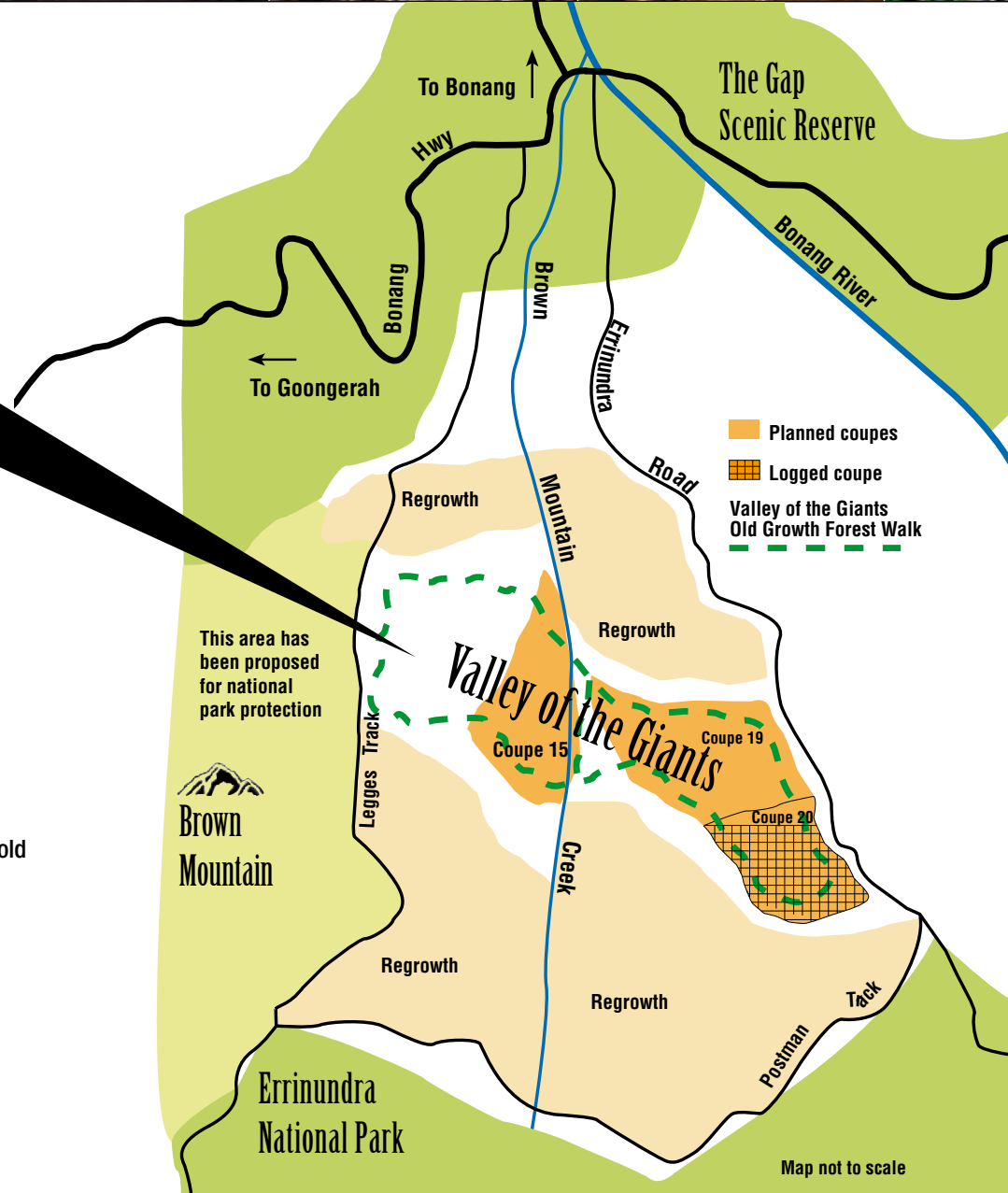
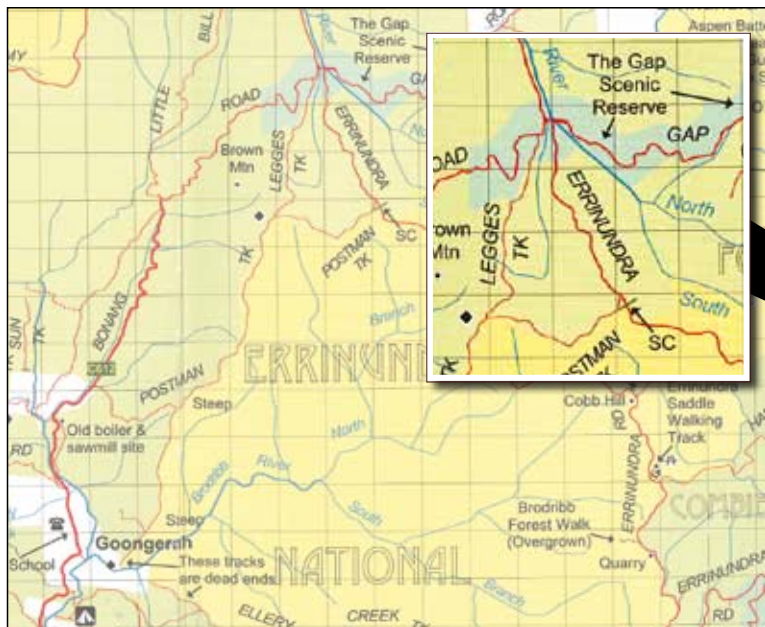
Tourism benefits

The stand of old growth is between the Gap Scenic Reserve and the Errinundra National Park and provides an excellent example of old growth forest. The walk is also an important corridor between the Gap Reserve and the Errinundra National Park. It has the potential to increase appreciation of these spectacular forests and generate significant revenue similar to “The Otway Fly”, which currently turns over \$3.6 million annually.

Other similar walks around the country include Tasmania’s Tahune Airwalk and Western Australia’s “Valley of the Giants” walk in Walpole.

Both walks return approximately \$2 million annually.





Labor's election promises:

- 1. Labor will immediately protect ... the last significant stands of Victoria's old growth forest currently available for logging under the National Parks Act.
- 2. Create a new tourism opportunity the Great Short Walks of East Gippsland (including) Old Growth Walk – Goongerah.

Flawed promises

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