



# MOUNT COLE / BEERIPMO STATE FOREST

**Mount Cole has long been a popular bushwalking, camping and picnic spot for generations of people from Ballarat and Melbourne. But its amenity, ambience and ecology is being wrecked by an industrial logging trial.**

Just off the Western Highway, Mount Cole State Forest is 25 kilometres from the township of Beaufort, and an hour west of Ballarat. This small patch of forest (around 9,000 hectares), rises to almost 900 meters and is surrounded by cleared farmland.

It is home to one of Victoria's most popular walking tracks, the Beeripmo Walk. It can be done as a day or overnight walk. Recognised by tourism, this moderate to challenging walk winds through cool fern gullies and tall forests, taking in views across the surrounding hills of both Mount Cole and the adjoining Buangor State Park. ([www.ffm.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/26274/Beeripmo\\_Walk.pdf](http://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/26274/Beeripmo_Walk.pdf))

***What walkers don't expect to see, is the track winding through bare, recently logged forest.***

## MOUNT COLE CLEARFELL LOGGING

Logging is managed through VicForests in a document called a Timber Utilisation Plan (TUP), which was approved in April 2017, part of its 'Community Forestry' program.

According to VicForests, Mount Cole State Forest contains about 3,600 hectares of forest which is available for timber production.

According to VicForests, the sustainable harvest levels for this forest is 1,500 cubic metres of low grade (D+) sawlog per year, with VicForests licences currently harvesting around 1000 cubic metres, but this is questioned.

In about 2003, due to an inability to supply sawlogs from the Mount Cole area forests, the government bought back the licence. At that time, the sustainable yield was considered to be 800 cubic meters per annum. Considering that this could not be supplied 15 years ago, it seems inconceivable that the sustainable yield is now considered to be 1,500 cubic meters. During this time, an estimated 3,000 trees fell

in extreme wind events and areas of forest have been destroyed by Armillaria fungus (which causes a form of die back) further reducing sawlog availability.

The Timber Utilisation Plan identified 47 logging coupes at Mount Cole. 36 of these were production coupes and the other 11 called Forest Management Operations. Of the 36 timber production coupes covering about 1,267 hectares, 19 are flagged as 'multi-staged management', which is a type of selective logging. The 17 other coupes, covering 330 hectares are flagged as 'even-aged management – in other words, clearfell industrial logging.

At least five of the 17 clearfell coupes have been logged in the last few years, assumably as part of VicForests three year trial; two in the last six months; and at least one had just been logged. Some of the future areas flagged for clearfell logging have significant conservation values, and need to be retained to ensure long term ecological health or area.

Little of the accessible high production timber forests at Mount Cole have been protected in national parks or other reserves and this needs to be considered in any assessment of uses.

## HABITATS AND WILDLIFE

Located within the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion, Mount Cole State Forest was identified as having high conservation values under the VNPA's Small Parks Project in 2010.

A report undertaken for conservation groups in 2010 identified the area rich in wildlife with:

- Over 130 species of birdlife;
- Nine threatened fauna species including the nationally endangered Regent Honey-eater and critically endangered Australian Bustard, the endangered Growling Grass Frog and Brown Toadlet, the vulnerable Brush-tailed Phascogale, Square-tailed Kite, Speckled Warbler and Southern Toadlet and near threatened Hooded Robin, all occurring in the

A total of 87 per cent of Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) in the forest are under-represented in the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion. Mount Cole contains small patches of three endangered EVCs (Alluvial Terraces Herb-rich Woodlands, Alluvial Terraces Herb-rich Woodlands/ Plains Grassy Woodland Complex and Creekline Grassy Woodland) and two vulnerable EVCs (Riparian Forest and Valley Grassy Forest). This is one of the reasons that Victorian Environmental Assessment Council has identified the area as requiring an assessment of public land use.

Many plants, such as Flame Heath, and animals, such as the Mountain Brushtail Possum, are at the extremities of their range, underling the ecological importance of the area and the significant contribution the area would make to the reserve system. ([www.wombatforestcare.org.au/documents/mt-cole-pyrenees-landscape-conservation-values.pdf](http://www.wombatforestcare.org.au/documents/mt-cole-pyrenees-landscape-conservation-values.pdf))

## LOGGING HISTORY

By 1889, demand from the goldfield towns led to thirty mills operating within the region until 1904. Soon after the Forests Commission was established in 1918, Mount Cole State Forest was closed for timber harvesting. The Forests Commission then reopened timber harvesting in a managed structure from 1947, until it was merged with the department in 1993.

According to a 2012 Department of Sustainability and Environment (now Department of Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)), "...in the 2000's timber harvesting was significantly scaled back and is largely a by-product of land management activities." This is certainly not the case six years on.

Much of western Victoria's commercial native forestry was transitioned out following the decision to create the Great Otway National Park in the 2002. In 2014, on the eve of the Victorian state election, the former Napthine government controversially gave VicForests, the government logging agency, control of logging operations in the west of the state, including Mt Cole.

A three year trial was commenced in early 2014 aiming to look at how some of the challenges associated with harvesting in the area are to be managed. ([www.vicforests.com.au/the-view-newsletter/the-view-december-2015](http://www.vicforests.com.au/the-view-newsletter/the-view-december-2015))

## COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Prior to 2014, the logging was managed by the Department of Primary Industries (or equivalent) through an approved Wood Utilisation Plan. VicForests replaced this with a document called a Timber Utilisation Plan (TUP), which was approved in April 2017, part of it 'Community Forestry' program.

VicForests describe the community forestry operation as follows: "Community Forestry operations provide the opportunity for local products to be sourced and utilised by local people and local businesses. The products which result from these operations are often specialised in nature and can not be readily sourced elsewhere. While commercial in nature, these operations are driven by local demand rather than commercial outcomes for VicForests." The timber harvesting at Mount Cole is clearly not for specialised timber.

The 2016–2017 VicForests annual report showed a total revenue for the so-called western 'community forestry' operation was approximately \$773,000, while at the same time VicForests received a grant from the Victorian Environment Department of \$678,000 (per annum) paid in advance. Assuming the difference of \$95,000 per annum is made from timber sales, the total costs to the Victorian Government, and taxpayers, is more than \$500,000 (half a million dollars), in return for the destruction to large areas of scarce and vulnerable publicly-owned native forest and woodland.

By way of comparison, the Victorian Government invested \$6.4 million, and the Federal Government \$1.8 million, in the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority for various conservation and land management projects in just one of the catchment management areas affected.