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HOT TOPIC

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK BEHIND THE NEWS

Battle for Otways comes to an end



A logging protest at Wye River in 2000.

ONE day in the next few weeks one of the most bitter and long-running wars waged in recent times will quietly come to an end.

The last tree logged in state native forests in the Otways will be fed into the ripping saw at Murnanes mill in Colac and the battle for the Otways will be over.

That last tree might already have been cut down.

Murnane's right to take timber from the State-owned forests expires at the end of this month. Traditionally the last log of the season is cut around the end of April before it gets too wet.

But such is the feeling around the issue that the mill owners are not saying when it will be cut and the Department of Sustainability and Environment says it does not know.

Murnanes stayed to the bitter end.

Other licence holders just got sick of the battle and allowed themselves to be bought out.

Murnanes are only getting out because of a promise then Victorian premier Steve Bracks made in the first days of the 2002 State election campaign that logging would end in 2008.

Mr Bracks and his entourage made the announcement at Triplet Falls in the Otways. Triplet Falls is close to the Otway Fly and has been improved to cater for increased visitor numbers and is symbolic of the new Otways economy based on tourism.

The message on that day was clear: chainsaws and sawdust were out and cappuccinos and soy lattes were in.

Triplet Falls was also the scene of one of the many incidents associated with the fight over the future of logging in the Otways.

In March 2003, not long after the Triplet Falls announcement, someone made deep chainsaw cuts into 75 mountain ash trees closing the park for many months.

There were many odd incidents over the years of the campaign.

In 2000, during the Apollo Bay Music Festival, someone cut down powerlines outside



Environmental advocates involved in preserving the Otways from logging, from left, Simon Birrell, Joan Lindros, Cameron Steele, Serena O'Meley, John Murray, Stuart McCallum and Mark Trengove outside Midway.

the town cutting electricity for several days. There was a major anti-logging theme during the festival and the act was seen as a direct attempt to sabotage the event.

No-one has ever been charged in relation to either of those incidents and each side still blames the other.

The list of campaign battles reads like a war history. Major battles were fought at places with evocative names like Rileys Ridge, Halls Ridge, Ciancios, Wild Dog Track and Little Spur. Like Lone Pine and the Nek at Gallipoli these names have become part of the environmentalists' folklore.

There were more physical and upfront clashes as well in the forest and at woodchip plants like Midway in North Shore.

One of the major publicity generating strategies during the campaign was the lock on where protesters would occupy the logging coupes and lock themselves to machinery meaning work could not continue.

Later they developed the tree sit strategy where members of an anarchic-type

group the Forest People, would scale trees and attach themselves to limbs 80 metres in the air.

Protesters would chain themselves to bulldozers, trucks, anything that was used in the logging industry.

Clashes were frequent, again with each side accusing the other of using violence.

The loggers saw the greens as dirty ferals who had never done a day's work in their lives and the greens saw the timber workers as redneck dinosaurs who did not know their industry was doomed.

The battle made for some strange alliances.

THE timber workers union, a division of the widely-hated CFMEU, sided with the bosses and the bosses would allow workers paid leave to attend pro-logging rallies in Melbourne.

The protesters were determined and seemed to have unlimited numbers.

Their longest continuous camp was six months at Riley Ridge.

There were court cases both civil and criminal which

ran for years. At least one case is still before the courts.

Loggers attempted to sue for loss of earnings in a fore-runner of the famous legal action launched by Gunns in Tasmania against pulp mill protesters.

In 2002, after Mr Bracks was re-elected and he kept his promise to end logging and create an expanded National Park, things went quiet ending years of turmoil in the bush.

At the centre of the fight since 1995 was the group known as OREN — the Otway Ranges Environment Network. It described itself as a group of individuals and groups who cared about the native forests in the Otways.

The group's spokesman was Simon Birrell. He was a mild-mannered activist who was notoriously reluctant to have his photo taken but was a very effective campaign manager and media operator.

Mr Birrell, who now lives in Queensland, this week reflected on the decade-long campaign.

Mr Birrell said of all the strategies they devised — protecting old growth forest, saving endangered species, the toilet tissue issue — it was water that finally won the day for the green movement.

"It was water that did it. When we could show local councils that they were losing more in water than they could ever make from forestry they started to come around," he said.

That brought on councils, like the City of Greater Geelong and Surf Coast, calling for the end to logging.

Even in Colac, which had always supported logging the then mayor Peter Mercer had to use his casting vote to defeat a motion calling for an end to logging in water catchment.

But it was not all peace and love on the protesters' side.

Mr Birrell is still critical of groups like the Wilderness Society and the Greens Party. "OREN was always happy to compromise. We would meet with the Government and say if you don't log this sensitive area we won't disrupt logging in this area," he said.

"I think that the Wilderness Society and the Greens' inability to compromise is the reason they don't get many wins."

Mr Birrell said OREN's goal was to make logging operations unworkable.

"The timber workers were the meat in the sandwich. We had no dispute with them it was the department we were trying to influence," he said.

Mr Birrell said the department for a long time took an aggressive approach and would insist on logging areas OREN warned them about.

So they tied up an enormous amount of resources because they were determined to log these areas.

That conflict generated media coverage and built political pressure in the metropolitan areas where the anti-logging message was readily received.

"OREN grew out of groups like the Save the Otways group of the 1980s started by Yvonne Francis," Mr Birrell said.

The Geelong Environment council and people like Joan



Former Geelong mayor and current South Barwon MP, Michael Crutchfield, left, is in a logging coupe outside Barwon Water in 1999 demanding an end to logging in Geelong's water catchment.

Lindros had also campaigned on the issue leading to a moratorium being declared on woodchipping by John Cain in the 1982 election campaign. In the early 1980s Ms Francis saw the need for direct action so formed the Save the Otways group and started taking groups into logging coupes.

"I wanted people to see what was behind the thin veneer of trees they left on the road side," she said this week.

"I was a member of the Otways Environment Group that was started by Judy Forrester and Carol Wilmk and they held the first political protest ever in Apollo Bay in 1981 against woodchipping."

Ms Francis was arrested in 1984 at Snowys Ridge in the Otways National Park. Her arrest made news but when she refused bail and spent two days in Colac police cells, that made big headlines.

The strategy of conflict, court cases and media coverage to focus attention on forests being cut down to make cardboard boxes and toilet paper was established.

Ms Francis refused to pay

the court imposed fine and had an ABC journalist with her as she waited to be arrested and taken to Pentridge prison but somebody paid her \$1500 fine. To this day she does not know who paid the money.

The battle has taken a toll on her. For a while she moved to Geelong and only returned to the Bay on weekends. Her shop was vandalised with the words "F off greenie Cs. Go home".

She tells stories of protesters being threatened with chainsaws, people being assaulted and trees being felled in the direction of protesters.

Despite the end to logging in public land she is still furious that the Otways is being destroyed by logging in private property and underground water pumping.

"We are still making the same mistakes. We are still butchering this small crescent of forest. It is a miracle that it has survived," she said.

In 1990 then minister Steve Crabb removed the moratorium on woodchipping and set the scene for 15 years of strife in the bush.

Ms Francis said some lo-

cals, like musician David Butt, took over the struggle but when Mr Birrell came on to the scene the campaign moved to a new level.

"He was a great organiser. He got people engaged all over Australia," Ms Francis said.

Mr Birrell grew up in Hamilton and holidayed regularly in the Otways. He had been involved in anti-logging campaigns in Gippsland before turning his attention to the Otways. "I thought that if we could not stop logging in the Otways we could not stop it anywhere," he recalled this week.

OREN was established in 1995 and had early success stopping logging on Wild Dog Ridge above Apollo Bay.

"We always maintained that it was woodchips that drove the industry in the Otways. It was not about getting hardwood for timber. It was about cutting down magnificent forests to make woodchips," he said.

"Eighty per cent of trees were going to woodchips."

Mr Birrell said OREN's early success stopping log-

ging in some areas led to greater support.

The paper giant Kimberly Clark was using Otways hardwoods to make toilet paper and facial tissues but a campaign used the banner of *Don't wipe your bum on the Otways* saw them walk away from their licence.

Every year from 1995 until 2002 logging was disrupted in the Otways by increasingly well-organised protest.

But while OREN and the environmental movement were winning some battles it was still unclear who would win the war.

The Federal Government was negotiating 20-year Regional Forest Agreements that would guarantee loggers rights well into the 21st century.

The Victorian Government reached agreement on the RFA but it was never formally signed.

As late as 2002 minister Sheryl Garbutt sacked her forest reference group that advised her on forest matters.

OREN was represented on that group which gave Mr Birrell direct access to the decision makers.

The Geelong community forum which had started as a general interest group, looking at issues like Belmont Common and Osborne Park, became consumed by the logging issue after an approach from Mr Birrell.

They packed a public meeting in Geelong West Town Hall demanding Geelong be included in the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process, lobbied politicians, raised a petition and organised rallies at the Midway site at North Shore.

Behind the scenes the Labor Party view was turning, however, through groups like the Otway Ranges Interest Group and local MPs like Peter Loney, Michael Crutchfield and Elaine Carbines.

When he was mayor of Geelong, Michael Crutchfield was photographed in logging coupes demanding an end to logging in Geelong's water catchment, Mr Birrell said.

Those sorts of things had a big effect. Even Liberals like Stretch Kontelj were supporting the anti-logging campaign. Eventually the City of Greater Geelong voted unanimously to support an end to logging, as did the Surf Coast Shire.

When Calco timber agreed to cash in its logging licence the end of the OREN campaign was in sight.

Only Colac's Murnanes mill still held a licence and they steadfastly refused to relinquish it, no matter how unpopular it made them.

But logging has not ended in the Otways. Far from it.

There are still many trucks hauling hard and softwoods from the Otways, but from privately-owned land.

Locals say there are just as many, if not more, log trucks on local roads.

Ms Francis would love to see an end to that form of logging also but Mr Birrell is happy to win the battles he can and not demand an all-or-nothing result. Mr Birrell is about to return to Victoria to begin a campaign to stop logging in Melbourne's water catchments.

The next battle could be about to begin.