

# THREATS TO NATURE

Case Studies in Success



**TRANSITIONING OUT OF  
LOGGING NATIVE FORESTS**



The protection of former forest reserves has added considerable social, economic, environmental and heritage values to Queensland's national park estate. Mapleton National Park, gazetted in 2014, is in the Blackall Range, which was once extensively logged for red cedar, white beech, bunya pine, blackbutt and tallowwood. Photo: Tatiana Gerus | CC BY-SA 2.0

Conflicts over native forest logging in Australia have raged for more than four decades and pressures on forests have grown despite 20-year regional forest agreements intended to achieve sustainable timber harvesting.

This case study of the 1999 South East Queensland Forests Agreement demonstrates an alternative path – a pact forged by the timber industry and conservation groups, supported by the Queensland Government, to transition the industry to hardwood plantations and transfer most state forests to national parks. This exemplar of collaborative, stakeholder-driven governance has achieved a more sustainable future for both the timber industry and native forests.

## THREATS TO NATIVE FORESTS AND AUSTRALIA'S FOREST WARS

Only 17% of Australia is forested.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite the destruction of almost half of Australia's forests since European

colonisation, many of the most biodiverse forests in the most cleared parts of Australia are still subject to logging. The 'ability of wood to regrow in a given timeframe does not guarantee a forest will do the same',<sup>1</sup> and logging is a major threat to several threatened species, including the swift parrot and Leadbeater's possum (both critically endangered), and the greater glider and western ringtail possum (both vulnerable).<sup>3,4</sup>

Conservationists' efforts to protect forests escalated during the 1980s and 90s – 'premiers fought over forests with prime ministers, cabinets agonised over timber resources and votes, and official inquiries failed to find a square metre of common ground.'<sup>5</sup> In response to the 'forest wars', the federal, state and territory governments in 1992 signed the National Forest Policy Statement, initiating a process intended to achieve ecologically sustainable management through joint federal-state regional assessments.<sup>1,6</sup> Eleven assessments were initiated but only 10 regional forest agreements (RFAs) were ratified – between 1997 and 2001, in Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia and

New South Wales.<sup>7</sup> The exception was Queensland.

The RFAs were intended to quell social conflict over native forests by protecting environmental values and providing resource security for the timber industry. But this has not been achieved: RFAs have largely failed to ensure industry profitability or adequately conserve biodiversity.<sup>4</sup> As the 20-year agreements have been extended, the 'uneasy peace' in many areas is breaking down.<sup>5,8,9</sup>

## A STAKEHOLDER-DRIVEN FOREST AGREEMENT

South East Queensland's forests are 'ecologically significant' with high species diversity and endemism.<sup>10,11</sup> Logging has depleted the habitat values of many forests. Hollows are rare due to the practice, until the late 1970s, of removing 'large, defective older trees', to reduce competition with regrowth trees.<sup>10</sup>

South East Queensland's RFA process started in 1997 with a scoping agreement and assessments of the social, economic,

environmental and heritage values of the region’s native forests. The area potentially available for logging covered almost 700,000 hectares, about 30% of the region’s forest area and almost double that in national parks.<sup>12</sup> To achieve the conservation targets under the RFA criteria would require protecting up to 90% of the area.<sup>1,12</sup> But the scenarios presented for public discussion by the federal government would protect only 23% to 57%, a compromise they justified on social and economic grounds.<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime, the Queensland Timber Board and conservationists (represented by the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society) had been in discussions, seeking a mutually agreeable outcome – forest conservation and a viable timber industry based on a complete shift to plantation forestry.<sup>1</sup> The Timber Board recognised that hardwood plantations offered the best potential for industry growth and sought a transition strategy to maintain timber supply during the 25 years it would take to grow plantation trees.

The Queensland Government decided to support the transition proposal and negotiated with the timber and conservation stakeholders to produce the South East Queensland (SEQ) Forests Agreement. The parties agreed that logging would immediately cease in about two-thirds of the state forest



The South East Queensland Forests Agreement will end about 200 years of logging on public lands by 2025 and in the Wide Bay area two years later. Many forests have been depleted by logging but will be managed to recover their natural values. Loggers pose with a large log in Brisbane Street, Beaudesert, ca. 1915. Photo: State Library of Queensland

area and be completely phased out by 2025 while the industry was assisted to transition to a plantation-based future. The majority of state forests would become conservation reserves.

The federal government refused to sign

the agreement. It opposed a complete transition to plantations, insisting that an RFA required that logging in native forests continue ‘in perpetuity’.<sup>1</sup> The Queensland Government decided to go it alone and fully fund implementation of the agreement itself.

## BOX 1

### Major features of the South East Queensland Forests Agreement

**Date:** 16 September 1999.

**Parties:** Australian Rainforest Conservation Society, Queensland Conservation Council, The Wilderness Society, Queensland Timber Board and Queensland Government.

**Objectives:**

- a world class conservation reserve system;
- ecologically sustainable management of forests;
- a competitive and efficient timber industry;
- enhanced economic development and employment prospects for rural communities.

**Conservation measures:**

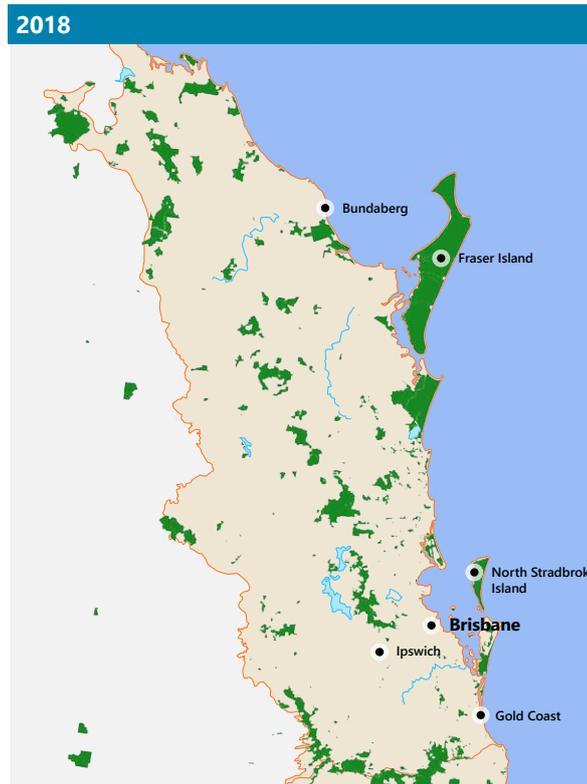
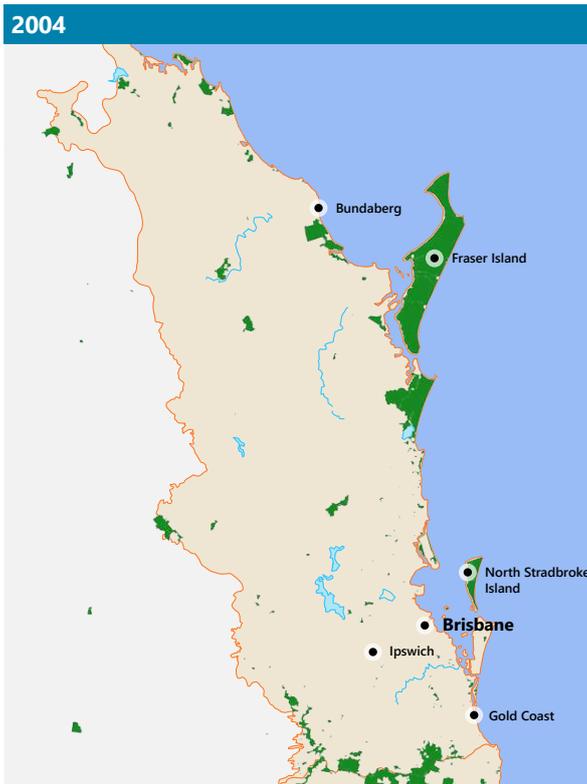
- Immediate addition to the conservation reserve system of about 425,000 hectares.
- Logging of native forests on state land to cease by the end of 2024.
- No clear felling, no export woodchip industry based on native forests, no logging of old growth or wilderness areas.

**Supply during the 25-year transition:**

- Logging to continue for 25 years with hardwood forests to be logged once.
- Wood supply agreements with industry to be 25 years, compensatable and tradeable.
- Current allocations to mills to remain until end of 2024 and allocation zones to be used flexibly to provide the approved volumes for the 25-year period.

**Government support for industry:**

- The development of hardwood plantations to enable industry to transition to a plantation-based hardwood resource by 2025 or sooner.
- Incentives to facilitate transition to value-added hardwood products, hardwood plantation timbers and private native hardwood resource including farm forestry.



South East Queensland now has a much more substantial conservation estate thanks to the South East Queensland Forests Agreement. Most of the additional national parks and conservation parks shown on the 2018 map have come from the conversion of state forests.

## THE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

**Stakeholder leadership and collaboration:** The SEQ Forests Agreement resulted from stakeholder-led negotiations, with conservation groups and the timber industry collaborating to pursue a mutually agreeable solution. It has been heralded as likely to make a 'substantial contribution to the future of national forest policy, as well as broader frameworks of bioregional planning, collaborative governance and ecologically sustainable development.'<sup>1</sup>

**Commitment to a transition pathway:** The negotiators of the forests agreement were able to avoid the 'half and half' pitfall of RFAs<sup>1</sup> – the compromising of conservation outcomes for social and economic reasons, typical of many such agreements – by developing an enduring solution involving transition of the industry from native forests to plantations. They demonstrated that 'new options are available for dealing with some perennial and conflict-ridden questions'.<sup>1</sup>

**Government support and financial commitment:** The Queensland Government decided to support the transition proposal despite opposition from the federal government and to fully fund the implementation itself.<sup>13</sup> This included reserving land, investing in plantations (\$18 million) and providing industry and community restructuring and support packages (an estimated \$80 million).<sup>1</sup>

### WHERE WE ARE NOW

South East Queensland's protected area network has more than doubled in area since the forests agreement.<sup>14,15</sup> With the addition of former state forests, conservation reserves are now more extensive and less fragmented, better protected from the impacts of surrounding land uses.<sup>10</sup>

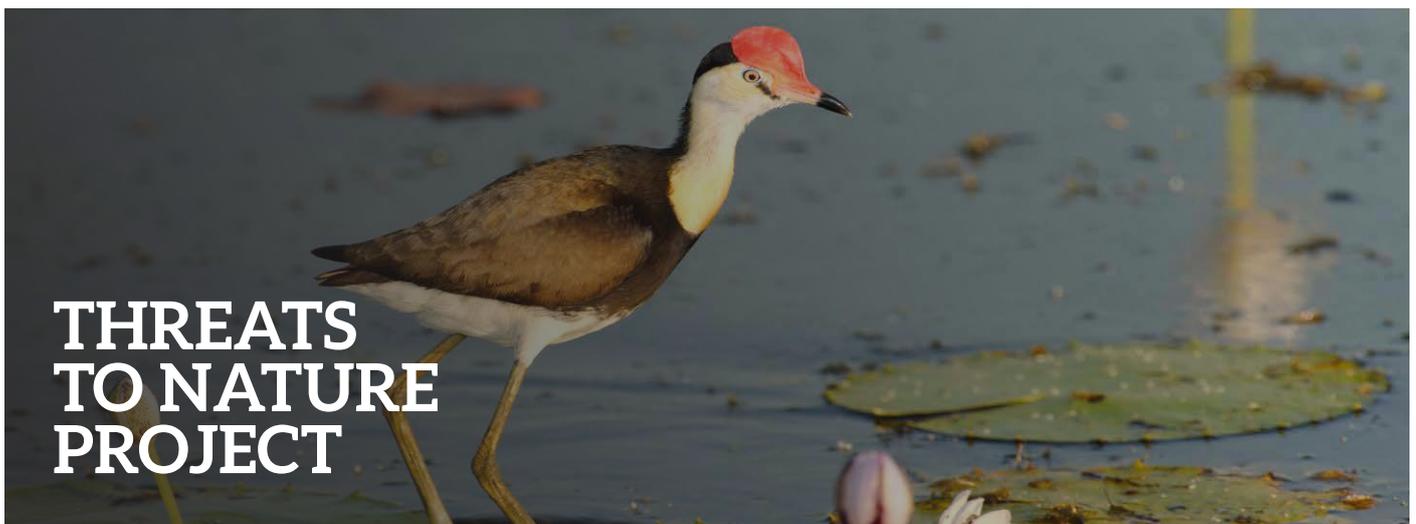
The transition plan for the timber industry has been only partly achieved. The

intention to establish a 20,000-hectare hardwood plantation estate will not be fully realised due to a lack of fertile sites, poor growth rates and other difficulties.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the phase-out of logging in native forests in the Wide Bay area has been delayed by 2 years. Under a new plan initiated in 2019, the Queensland Government plans a 'comprehensive study into sustainable, future supply options for native hardwood timber'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite setbacks and some recanting by subsequent state governments, the SEQ Forests Agreement has largely avoided the problems besetting the RFA process. The government and stakeholder consensus to seek a new future for the timber industry and protect native forests on state land contrasts with the ongoing 'forest wars' in other states and provides an exemplar of collaborative governance.

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If Australians are to protect what is most distinctive about this country – our unique plants, animals and ecological communities – we urgently need to overcome the key threats facing them.



It is not possible to recover all of our threatened species one by one through species-focused efforts. We also need a concerted national focus to overcome the major threats our native plants and animals have in common – in particular **invasive species, climate change, habitat destruction, adverse fire regimes** and **changes to natural water flows**.

Australia's threat abatement system needs to be more ambitious, better funded and nationally coordinated.