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‘Forest gardening’: Stoush over Aboriginal corporation’s land management

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It sounds peaceful and calm, but the concept of “forest gardening” has sparked a new chapter in Victoria’s forest wars, pitting an Aboriginal corporation against a prominent ecologist and his publisher, Allen and Unwin.

Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, which trades as DJAARA, in December concluded a 22-month licence with VicForests that permitted the removal of up to 600,000 cubic metres of timber damaged in the 2021 storms from the Wombat State Forest near Daylesford.

It was to be [the first stage in a multi-generational “forest gardening” project](https://djadjawurrung.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Our-work-healing-the-Wombat-State-Forest-18-June-22-1.pdf), to restore First Nations sovereignty and oversight over Country.

In his new book *The Forest Wars*, Australian National University forest ecology professor David Lindenmayer took aim at forest gardening, describing it as logging that “will damage, not heal, Country”, and “continue the forest destruction wrought by [VicForests](https://www.smh.com.au/link/follow-20170101-p5fc53)”.

[If a tree falls in the forest, let the fallen log lie, say conservationists](https://www.smh.com.au/national/victoria/if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest-let-fallen-logs-lie-say-conservationists-20240315-p5fcqe.html)

Lindenmayer argued that in “a highly cynical move”, VicForests – [which will cease operations in June](https://www.smh.com.au/link/follow-20170101-p5fc53) – had sought to develop partnerships with First Nations organisations to “continue industrial native forest logging” after Victoria ended commercial native logging in January.

“[DJAARA’S] partnership with VicForests has resulted in what appears to simply be business-as-usual logging in the Wombat Forest,” he wrote.

DJAARA maintains the timber removed under its licence with VicForests was storm damaged, and “nowhere near” 600,000 cubic metres of timber was removed under the arrangement.

Acting chief executive Cassandra Lewis described Lindenmayer’s assessment as offensive.

“I think it’s offensive to be told that the cultural application of land management, described as forest gardening, is a flawed argument, as if it were merely an idea to be discredited and not a deeply significant cultural understanding,” she said.

“And it’s distressing to be told that these cultural land management practices are damaging Country when we know that not to be true.”

Professor David Lindenmayer’s latest book, The Forest Wars, has sparked complaints from the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Corporation.*Credit:Wolter Peeters*

DJAARA wrote to publisher Allen and Unwin asking for a recall of Lindenmayer’s latest book – which has sold out of its first print run – and accused him of disrespecting and “speaking down” to traditional owners.

In a statement, Lindenmayer’s publisher said: “Allen & Unwin can confirm DJAARA have contacted us regarding *The Forest Wars*, and while we respect their feedback the book will not be withdrawn from sale.”

Lindenmayer, who in 2017 [co-authored a paper with more than two dozen other scientists](https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1365-2664.12945) on the impacts of salvage logging on biodiversity, said: “So-called storm recovery never recovers anything – it degrades the forest.”

According to a forest licence issued in March 2022 and seen by this masthead, material removed from Wombat State Forest under the partnership between DJAARA and VicForests was to be primarily “windthrown timber” that fell [during wild storms in 2021](https://www.smh.com.au/link/follow-20170101-p5afke). The licence also allowed for the removal of “incidentally generated timber resulting from hazard treatment or removal”.

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action is conducting what it calls “debris removal” operations in the Wombat State Forest.*Credit:Chris Taylor*

“The forest was left [after the 2021 storm] with as many, in some places, as 50 per cent of trees on their sides, and it presented an extreme fire risk,” says DJAARA’s acting general manager, Jim Brooks.

“One of the really crucial things about this is, it wasn’t just a green light to VicForests to go ahead and take out valuable timber … we actually had an agreement with VicForests about what timber would be taken, and it was timber that presented a risk.”

DJAARA’s business case for forest gardening, released in October 2022, was written by [forestry consultant Damien O’Reilly](https://induforgroup.com/team-members/damien-oreilly/), who has worked extensively with the forestry industry and, more recently, consulted to government on forestry.

According to the business case, DJAARA would undertake a range of land management practices including thinning (“restoring culturally recognisable structures to our forests”), revegetation, rehabilitation, regeneration and cultural burns, in partnerships with organisations and private landholders.

Brooks said the comprehensive multi-generational forest gardening strategy – which entails rejuvenation, regeneration and restoring Country – had barely had a chance to begin.

Is forestry the industry that won’t quit?

Almost exactly a year ago, the then-Andrews government announced it would end native forest logging in Victoria by January 1 this ear.

However, Lindenmayer and other forest conservationists maintain Victorian forestry is the industry that refuses to die.

After DJAARA’s agreement with VicForests concluded on December 31, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action began its own timber removal operation.

A [government gazette in November](https://www.gazette.vic.gov.au/gazette/Gazettes2023/GG2023S624.pdf?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0BMQABHbUllGz8bGbuWTe61nIo37ysCNFBPH8679hIidMhRKKY9szgVb_IbeH5rQ_aem_AfH6lgcJqze3pRQgiEAUVK1OXs0kT8A64aICLHejH5nhlBHCJY1QI-Ypo9Ymb2kRJfs), a month before the VicForests agreement with DJAARA expired, issued a public safety notice for tracts of the Wombat State Forest north of Trentham-Daylesford Road to allow for “timber debris extraction operations”.

A Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action spokesman said the agency was conducting works “to remove storm debris in the Wombat Forest to mitigate bushfire risk”, and was ensuring “all operations comply with relevant legislation”.

“There is no timber harvesting or salvage logging taking place for a commercial purpose in the Wombat State Forest,” he said. “The works underway are removing storm debris and rehabilitating the forest to reduce the risk of fire.”

Photos taken in Wombat State Forest near Osborne Road within the past fortnight show log landing sites with freshly cut trees piled two metres high. Dead timber from the 2021 storms is dry and silver. By contrast, the logs pictured within the past fortnight are freshly cut, some with sap still visible on the saw marks.

“In some cases,” the spokesman said, “timber not left for environmental and habitat purposes is used for highest and best uses, this includes as domestic firewood.”

Brooks said the works currently underway were not a DJAARA operation.

“We have no legal capacity to authorise, prevent or influence those works,” he said.

“These works are unrelated to our *Galk Galk Dhelkunya* (Forest Gardening) strategy, principles and practice which are about recreating a healthy, bio-diverse forest ecosystem.”

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