

The Saturday Paper

NEWS

ANALYSIS: The Electrical Trades Union has used its political leverage to keep Victoria's Central Highlands open for hunting, in the midst of a national backtracking on forest conservation. *By Sarah Rees.*

How ETU shooters foiled a national park



ETU official Joe Youssef (left) at the ETU Delegates Conference in Melbourne last month.
CREDIT: ETU, VICTORIAN BRANCH

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At this year's Electrical Trades Union Victorian branch delegates conference at the Melbourne Convention Centre, the message from the stage was "Work Hard, Rest Hard, Play Harder". Beyond the podium, it was clear what "play" meant: something locked, loaded and on full display.

Amid talks on labour rights and industrial power, delegates wandered from speeches to gun displays, handling precision long-range rifles, air rifles mimicking sniper systems, and military-style firearms by heritage brands such as Winchester. One of the weapons, the Steyr HS .50 M1, is capable of piercing lightly armoured vehicles. It would vaporise a deer.

It was in this setting that the Victorian Minister for Outdoor Recreation and Environment Steve Dimopoulos addressed the room. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to expanding recreational shooting access, including on public land and in national parks, and declared that the Great Forest National Park proposed for the state's Central Highlands "is not, and never has been, a Victorian Labor government initiative". Victorian Fisheries Authority branding sat alongside handgun manufacturer Beretta. The number of women in the audience could be counted on one hand.

As debate intensifies over the future of Victoria's public lands – whether for conservation or so-called “active management” – this imagery speaks for itself, as a statement of political intent. The government is not backing parks, it is backing barrels.

Victoria is home to some of the most ecologically significant forests on Earth. Stretching along the eastern escarpment of Melbourne, the Central Highlands provide drinking water to millions, store vast amounts of carbon, and are home to unique biodiversity, including more than 70 threatened species and the tallest flowering trees on the planet: the mountain ash.

In 2023, the government's own Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) delivered a clear recommendation: these forests urgently need permanent protection. The report concluded that only a large national park is commensurate with the value that this region offers.

Despite repeated commitments to protect the area, the Labor government has failed to deliver.

Instead of the long-promised “large new parks and reserves”, it has overseen delays, deferrals and inaction. In the vacuum, a coordinated campaign led by recreational shooters, four-wheel drive groups and prospectors, backed by

the ETU and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), has grown in influence. Once fringe and now central, this alliance is using misinformation and political leverage to stall conservation and rebrand public land as a battleground in a new culture war.

Labor declared native forest logging would end by the middle of last year. It marked a major milestone, achieved after decades of community struggle, scientific evidence and overwhelming public support. But it came with a hefty price tag. More than \$1.281 billion in taxpayer funding was allocated to ease the industry's "transition", including \$875 million for forestry workers and \$290 million for fuel break and site work contractors.

However, instead of ending the harm, some of this funding has prolonged it. Logging has surged on private land, firebreaks are tearing through intact native forest, and Victorian mills are still processing contentious logs trucked in from places such as Tasmania. Even some of Victoria's oldest national parks are undergoing salvage logging operations.

The public was promised more than an end to logging. They were promised a national park. The Great Forest National Park, proposed more than a decade ago, was designed to protect the last refuge of the critically endangered Leadbeater's

possum and to secure Melbourne's water supply for generations. It is a vision backed by scientists and supported by global conservation leaders such as Jane Goodall and David Attenborough. Communities, unions and conservationists agreed to end native forest logging, deliver permanent protection and transition workers fairly. Then premier Daniel Andrews embraced the concept.

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Last year, polling by RedBridge Group showed 80 per cent of Victorians support new national parks. Not a single hectare of new park has been legislated.

Instead, Steve Dimopoulos has expanded recreational shooting across 130,000 hectares of existing national parks, with no clear plan for how families and firearms would coexist. The announcement recast public conservation land as

hunting terrain and weakened Victoria's claim to national and international leadership on biodiversity and climate. Without new protected areas, Victoria risks falling behind on Australia's "30 by 30" commitment, which seeks to protect 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030.

Victoria is not alone in falling short on its conservation promises. In New South Wales, the long-awaited Great Koala National Park remains delayed, while Queensland has stalled in expanding its protected areas despite a longstanding commitment to double them.

Nicky Moffat from the Queensland Conservation Council says the Crisafulli government is stalling on its obligations to halt extinctions and protect biodiversity, though it has invested more than \$440 million in tourism. It's feared that the proposed Greater Glider Forest Park, announced last year, has been quietly shelved. Moffat has concerns that logging licences may be reissued for forests in south-east Queensland that should now be protected as reserves.

There is growing unease that a coordinated anti-conservation lobby is working across state lines to stall environmental progress.

One of the tactics increasingly used to justify recreational hunting is the claim that it constitutes "pest control". However, this

assertion lacks scientific grounding. Jack Gough from the Invasive Species Council says: “Around the country, the shooting lobby have delayed, undermined and stopped effective feral deer control for decades and are the reason feral deer numbers are so high and growing. If the government is serious about protecting our wildlife, they need to stop pandering to the shooting lobby and scrap the protections for deer as game animals under Victorian law.”

At the centre of the resistance is the ETU, led by state secretary Troy Gray. He has publicly threatened to halt major infrastructure projects if hunting restrictions are introduced. The motive is political. Facing competition from the far right, the unions are weaponising cultural identity and positioning themselves as defenders of “access” against what they frame as green elitism. Their message to Labor is simple: side with us or lose working-class votes.

Labor appears to be listening. Dimopoulos confirmed at the conference that the Great Forest National Park would not be delivered. It was a public rejection of Labor’s own stated policy, a dismissal of scientific consensus and a blow to the thousands of Victorians who have campaigned for the park for more than a decade. By bowing to pressure from union backers, Labor has turned its back on the broader community it was elected to represent.

Even when presented with a cost-neutral solution, a \$224 million bond to support the development of the Great Forest National Park, the government refused to act. The Great Forest bond proposal aimed to deliver what was, to my knowledge, the largest park restoration and development package in Victoria's history funded by private creditors. It included the restoration of 8000 hectares of logged and failed regeneration, support for Indigenous-led cultural programs, upgrades to visitor infrastructure, and the creation of regional jobs. Crucially, it was designed to operate without drawing from the state budget. Despite strong backing from environmental groups, finance experts and community leaders, the government declined to support the initiative.

This is not just a policy failure, it is a betrayal of trust. In 2014, conservationists joined the Forest Industry Taskforce in good faith, helping craft a transition plan from logging to protection. That process produced a statement of intent calling for new parks and ecological recovery. But when it came time to legislate, loggers and unions lobbied, momentum was lost and Labor's commitment to the forests quietly withered. The state handed over more than a billion taxpayer dollars to a dying industry and got nothing in return.

Public sentiment has not changed. According to

RedBridge, support for the Great Forest National Park lifts Labor's vote by 33 per cent, while failure to deliver erodes it by 34 per cent. The park would be a political asset.

This is not just bad politics, it is bad governance. In 2012, the Supreme Court of Victoria, in *MyEnvironment Inc v VicForests*, called for an urgent review of the Leadbeater's possum reserve system following the Black Saturday fires. That review never occurred, and the possum is now critically endangered. With the expiration of the Regional Forest Agreements, the species arguably has less legal protection today than it did in the year of its rediscovery in 1961.

There may be worse to come. A new public lands act is reportedly in development, designed to enable so-called "active management". This could be a legislative Trojan Horse for commercial access, logging or other extractive uses. The long-delayed release of the report on the Central Highlands by the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement raises concerns that the government is preparing to offer symbolic gestures instead of meaningful reform.

Right now, the 80 per cent of Victorians who want more national parks are being sidelined in favour of a narrow group of off-road lobbyists. National parks are increasingly being reframed as spaces of exclusion rather than inclusion. But

these forests belong to everyone. Recreational activities such as hunting, horseriding, fishing and four-wheel driving are already permitted in many national parks, and the proposed Great Forest National Park would be no different.

The current outrage is a manufactured beat-up, designed to mine votes from a culture war with no real foundation, and to keep land tenure open for extractive uses including, potentially, a return to logging.

This is not a fringe issue. It is a reflection of who we are and what we value. Public land should serve the public. And we should serve it in return – by protecting it now, and for future generations.



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