



The Story of Fella's Coupe

What happens when threatened species meet plantations

Presented by Gippsland Forest Guardians (GFG) Lisa Barrand, Stuart Inchley and Victoria Johnson

Gippsland Forest Guardians (GFG) was established in 2024 in response to serious concerns about threats to biodiversity, regulatory oversight and environmental governance in Victoria's plantation forestry sector.

GFG started with citizen science discoveries of threatened species including Slender Tree-ferns and rainforest in a logging coupe in Turtons Creek. An initial meeting with the logging company (HVP) about our discoveries led to grave concerns about the quality of surveys and protections that would be put in place, and catalysed community action. These concerns, combined with the failure of both the Victorian Conservation Regulator and Local Government to enforce government published and expert supported protections for threatened species in the logging coupe, underscored the need for a coordinated community response.

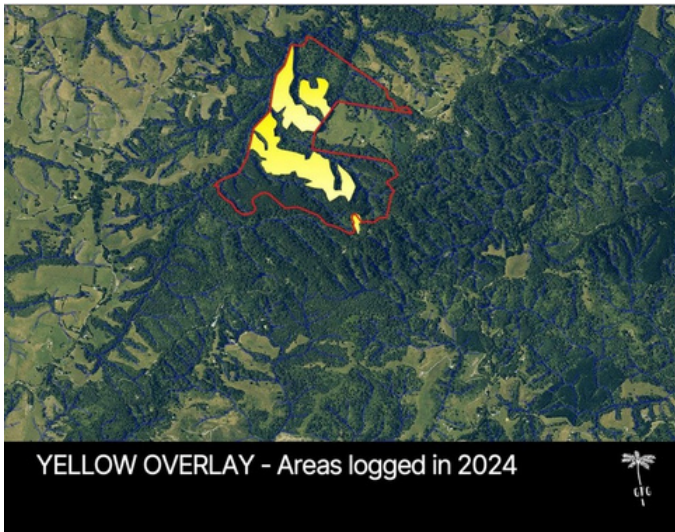
GFG's purpose is to protect Gippsland's forests for future generations of animals, plants and people. The group engages in evidence-based advocacy, with a focus on threatened species protection, improved regulation, transparency and environmentally responsible forestry practices. The Gippsland Forest Guardians also facilitate citizen science and events that celebrate the forests and all the precious plants and animals that call them home.



Fella's Coupe lies on the western side of the unceded **Brataualung lands of the Gunai-Kurnai people**, in the **south-western Strzelecki Ranges** of Victoria.



Although licensed to **Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP)** as a “plantation” coupe, the area is **Crown Land**, contains significant **protected native forest** and is in a **high conservation value** area. The Strzeleckis look like a large deeply forested area, but if you carve out the areas managed by the HVP logging company, it’s a very different picture, particularly when you keep in mind that they are planning to turn their entire leasehold and freehold estate over to pines, which will have significant biodiversity implications for the Strzeleckis.



Mapping of the coupe shows:

- **Red line:** Coupe boundary
- **Yellow overlay:** Areas logged in 2024

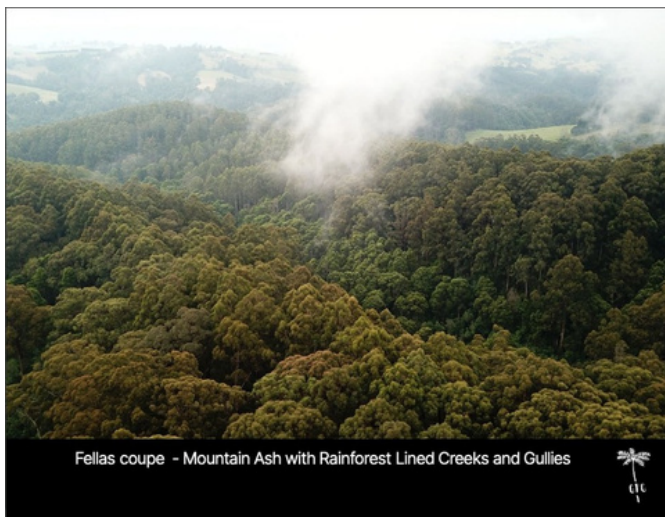


- **Green overlay:** Protected native forest in and around the coupe



Historically, most of Fella's coupe was classified as **Protected Forest** and groups including the Save Our Strzeleckis fought to stop the inclusion of 7,000 hectares of native forest being leased to HVP as plantation.

A Rich and Threatened Ecosystem



Despite being labelled a plantation, **Fella's Coupe** hosts critical native habitats:

- **Cool Temperate Rainforest** with Southern Sassafras



- **Endangered Slender Tree-ferns (*Cyathea cunninghamii*) and Netted Brake (*Pteris epaleata*)**



- **Gang-gang Cockatoo** breeding area, **Blue Winged Parrot** and **Pilot Birds**, all Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999 Act *listed*
- **South Gippsland Spiny Crayfish** and **Strzelecki Burrowing Crayfish** – Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act *Endangered*



Photos and on-site surveys show **inadequate buffer zones, rainforest damage, and post-logging windthrow** affecting these fragile ecosystems.

Legal and Regulatory Issues

Although HVP manages the coupe under a plantation licence, it remains **Crown Land**, creating a complex web of responsibility:

- Governed by the **Victorian Plantations Corporation (VPC) Act**
- Subject to **FFG Act** and **EPBC Act** protections
- Local councils act as the responsible authority but in our view, **lack regulatory capacity**

An **Action Statement under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee (FFG) Act** identifies forestry as a threat to the **Slender Tree-fern** and refers to permanent protections in the **Code of Practice for Timber Production**, including a **200-metre special management zone** used in the past.

However, when this was raised with **HVP Plantations**, the company said the rule did not apply.

The **Conservation Regulator** advised that the site is deemed private **land for the purpose of the Code**, even though it is **Crown land**, and also, quickly shockingly, that **Action Statements are not mandatory**.

The Regulator confirmed the **FFG Act applies** on the Fellas coupe and that **HVP is not exempt**. Under the Act, Slender Tree-ferns must not be “*taken*”—meaning killed, injured, disturbed, or collected. Logging within metres of the ferns, altering their environment and planting pines, we believe causes disturbance.

A **formal complaint** was lodged, but the Regulator found **no breach**. Concerns remain that the definition of “*take*” was ignored. The matter was referred to **local council**, which regulates forestry on private land. Initially, council required **no specific protection**, but following **community and media pressure**, it ordered an **audit of the Fellas coupe**.

An **OVIC decision (2024)** required release of the Timber Harvest Plan (THP) to GFG, revealing that the section on **environmental controls said “N/A”**, meaning that HVP was doing nothing in addition to their internal procedures set out in two internal HVP documents. HVP refused to share these, and council — the regulating authority — don’t have them.



The federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) has written to HVP to outline their **obligations under the EPBC act**.



Our experience is that **high conservation value forests** and threatened species in the Strzeleckis are **essentially unregulated**. The FFG Act, Action Statements, and Timber Code are window dressing, and governments are not acting.

So we realised **it’s up to us to protect this area**, which led us to explore other options — including the FSC.

Raising our concerns with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)



HVP holds FSC certification through **SCS Global Services** (Certifying Body), under **ASI Assurance** (Accrediting Body) and **FSC International** (scheme owner).

Complaint Outcomes to Date

Our advocacy has helped trigger several important developments. This highlights the potential of FSC processes as a **powerful tool for accountability** when Australian laws fall short.

SCS Global Complaint

Auditors found **inadequate documentation** of protections for the Slender Tree-fern and other high conservation values. The **FSC Lead Auditor** could not confirm what protection zones were in place or whether they were adequate.

ASI Comprehensive Audit of HVP

Following our complaint, the **Assurance Services International (ASI)** initiated a **comprehensive audit of HVP**—its most senior investigator revisiting sites we identified. This audit will examine, amongst other things, whether **SCS Global's earlier findings were adequate**. We were on-site to show evidence and were listened to carefully by the auditors. The final report is pending, and we await its conclusions with great interest.

No Pines replacing Mountain Ash

We also challenged HVP's plan to **replant with pines**, arguing the site should be restored to its **pre-harvest condition**.

FSC Draft Interpretation


A **draft interpretation** relating to the Indicators for Principle 10.1.1 and 10.1.2, confirm that:

"No. Indicators 10.1.1 and 10.1.2 of the FSC National Forest Stewardship Standard of Australia do not permit replanting a harvested native species plantation with an exotic species, such as *Pinus radiata*."



A **public consultation** drew **over 80 submissions**, showing strong community engagement.

FSC User Tips...




Things to know

- Onus is on you to find evidence
- Time consuming - understatement
- A detailed mindset is required.

Worth it?... Yes

- FSC looks to the "Best Available Information", not just compliance with Australian law
- *Potentially* powerful lever for change.
- Consumers expect third party certification schemes to ensure compliance



Key insights:

- The FSC has a progressive approach to determining what information should be considered by Certificate Holders such as HVP in the way they protect rare and threatened species. The FSC required the use of the "**Best Available Information,**" not just legal compliance. This means expert advice such as the Action Statements developed by DEECA scientists should be considered valid information and considered.
- Community vigilance and detailed evidence are crucial to drive change.

Community is central to the campaign







Building community



Over 200 hundred people have come out to GFG's education and community events including schools, university groups, NGOs and interested community members. They connect with the rainforest and the Slender Tree-ferns and they connect with each other, **building community** and a movement of people inspired to protect these forests.








Tune in to hear Lisa on 3CR Breakfast tomorrow at 8am ...

Community outreach



We also connect people back into the forest through **science, art and the media**, so they are informed and motivated when opportunities for advocacy and action arise.

Moving Forward

The campaign for Fella's Coupe has:

- Exposed the hidden **ecological value of what has been called "plantation"** in Fella's Coupe
- **Mobilised citizens and experts** to defend threatened species
- Called for **regulatory reform** and **better oversight**

Fella's Coupe is not an isolated case.

To protect our forests and wildlife, GFG calls for:

- Reassessment of what qualifies as a "plantation"
- Proper protection of threatened species in line with the best available evidence
- Stronger enforcement and transparency
- No replacement of native species plantations with exotic species such as Pines



*****October 2025 update***:** In very good news HVP have released the following statement about Fella's Coupe on their website:

"HVP has now decided that this site will **no longer be managed for timber production**. Instead, the harvested area will be **regenerated to native forest**. Additionally, we have decided to not harvest a 19 hectare area of eucalypt plantation also at this site."

For more information and to stay up to date with the campaign, visit:

www.gippslandforestguardians.org.au

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