

Destroying the World's Forests: The Endless Struggle against Logging

Miranda Gibson's Courageous Campaign to Protect the Environment

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For the past year, Miranda Gibson has lived on a small platform that is suspended 60 metres above the floor of an ancient forest in Tasmania's south. "I climbed up this tree because I wanted to expose to the world the reality that logging was continuing in these forests despite promises by the government to the contrary. I wanted to do something that would show the world how significant these forests are," says Miranda.

'The Observer Tree', as Miranda has named her action, is now one year old. Miranda's tree-sit has attracted significant global attention. "Every day there are comments on my website, people discovering these forests for the first time, or reconnecting with them through my blog," says Miranda. The twelve month anniversary of Miranda's tree-sit will be celebrated with a "cyber event." As explained by Miranda, "I will be conducting a live-stream online broadcast from the tree tops. From here we will cross to guest speakers and events around the world."

Miranda's supporters are numerous throughout the global environmental movement. Julia Butterfly Hill, who holds the tree-sitting world record (achieved through spending two years at the top of a Californian Redwood) states that "Miranda Gibson is taking a powerful stand not only on behalf of Tasmania's forests, but also on behalf of the millions of people all over the world." Internationally renowned author Derrick Jensen expressed gratitude for Miranda's work. "Thank you, Miranda, for what you are doing. You are an inspiration to me and to so

many others."



Through this period, Miranda and her tree have endured a cold Tasmanian winter, which has delivered freezing temperatures, rain and snow. Not everyone is cut out to cope in such trying circumstances. Miranda explains her commitment as stemming from “The moment I saw the contrast between a lifeless clear fell and an old growth forest - I knew that something needed to be done to protect these unique ecosystems.”

Former leader of the Australian Greens, Dr Bob Brown, describes the impact of Miranda’s tree-sit as being “helpful in reminding people around Australia that these are forests of World Heritage value.” According to Miranda, the increasing awareness of Tasmania’s forests will lead to action. “When people around the world demand a higher standard of environmental responsibility here in Tasmania, the industry and the government must come eventually come into line.” Dr Brown explains that Miranda had first approached him with her idea of the Observer Tree, for which he was “very supportive.”

“Miranda is an intelligent, well centred, strong minded young woman - who is committed to saving those forests,” said Dr Brown. Dr Brown has arranged live discussions with Miranda in front of audiences, which he claims always provide a rapturous ovation for Miranda and her work. Dr Brown is unequivocal in his admiration for Miranda, labelling Miranda an “environmental hero.”

This action is perhaps the most emphatic in a long and passionately fought battle, which has consistently divided Tasmania. Supporters of the timber industry are firmly entrenched on one side, with environmentalists on the other. There are few people in between. This feud, ongoing since woodchipping commenced in Tasmania in 1972, was set to end with the announcement of the Tasmanian forest agreement, struck between representatives of the timber industry and environmental non government organisations. After two years of bitterly-fought negotiations, a deal was finally forged between the two opposing parties. And just in time. Failure to complete these negotiations would have jeopardised \$100 million in Federal money, to assist the restructuring of the ailing timber industry.

The agreement, which is currently waiting approval from Tasmania’s Legislative Council, will see the immediate protection of 395,199 hectares of forest, with a further 108,813 hectares

to be protected by 2015. A further 20,183 hectares have been earmarked as a “once-off log, restore and reserve area,” while 1,228 hectares are classified as a “log-of-last-resort” zone. According to the agreement, the cap on saw logs to be taken from native forest is down to 137,000 cubic metres annually, representing a drop from 348,000 cubic metres. The agreement promises to ensure the protection of iconic forests, such as the Styx Valley, Upper Florentine and Weld Valley.

Signatories to the agreement include Terry Edwards of the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania, Vica Bayley of The Wilderness Society and Phill Pullinger of Environment Tasmania. The parties emerged triumphantly from the discussions, talking in terms that indicated the gravity of the discussions and their subsequent impact on the smallest Australian state. Terry Edwards spoke as a seasoned diplomat calling an end to a long and bloody confrontation, claiming that “We believe it is time for the war to cease...” Tasmanian Premier Lara Giddings channelled Benjamin Franklin, stating that “Out of adversity comes opportunity and what has been handed to us today is a momentous opportunity to heal decades of division.” Giddings described the agreement as an “historic moment - after 30 years of division, we have the opportunity to work together towards a common goal.” Tasmanian Greens Leader Nick McKim likened forest protestors to Rosa Parks, Mahatma Ghandi and Nelson Mandela, which prompted Liberal Opposition Leader Will Hodgman to label McKim as an environmental saboteur and then call for his resignation. Although an agreement has been struck between elements of the two opposing camps, clearly this will not result in the ending of hostility.

With the announcement of the forest agreement, Miranda could be forgiven for thinking that her work had been done. Miranda sees things differently, citing numerous concerns that she has with the agreement. “Firstly, the lack of clear time frames for protection could see logging continue in those areas earmarked for reserves. In addition, there are clauses that could prevent those reserves from every being secured.” Miranda considers that the agreement will result in the “propping up” of the native forest industry, and a renewed commitment to woodchipping; which Miranda argues “is not a positive step forward for Tasmania environmentally, socially or economically.”

However, Terry Edwards feels that it is the forest industry which has given the most ground in this instance. “The timber industry has moved significantly and effectively on this proposal, largely giving environmental groups what they have been asking for and in return that this does mean peace in our forests and that that peace be lasting,” Mr Edwards said. Edwards attempted to ward off potential criticism, stating that “Many will accuse us of selling out (but) we’ve done an assessment of what we can wear and still maintain a reasonable and viable industry going forward,” he said.

Jan Davis, Chief Executive of the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association criticised both sides of the negotiation, stating that “It is unconscionable for a group of unelected environmental groups and industry representatives to be making decisions to lock up public resources in perpetuity.” Prior to the conclusion of negotiations, Davis wrote that “Despite the government’s apparent belief that the war is all over bar the shouting. I think we all know better than that. This is a train wreck waiting to happen.” The pessimism expressed by Davis is not without basis. Dr Brown refers to Federal and State politics, raising concerns that the possible election of a Federal Liberal Government and Tasmanian Liberal Government could cast doubt over the longevity of the agreement. “Tony Abbott says he won’t protect (the forests). Will Hodgman says that he will tear up that agreement. There are a lot of hurdles to be jumped. To date, not one tree has been protected, not even

Miranda's," says Dr Brown. Despite reservations about the strength of the agreement, Miranda is optimistic about the future of Tasmania's forests. "I have hope that Tasmania's forests will be protected. I believe it is inevitable."

With signatories to the forest agreement locked in discussions concerning the passage of the bill through Tasmania's Legislative Council, Dr Brown states that Miranda's tree sit is taking place at a time, "When so much oomph has been lost by environmental activism around the world." Lamenting the decline in direct action of environmental activists globally, which he describes as "a serious loss to the environmental movement," Dr Brown refers to the importance of conducting environmental action within the natural setting. "The strength of campaigning is being in a forest, on a sea shore, out at sea with the whales, up on the Murray Darling. The direct relationship with nature has always been a key in galvanising support," says Dr Brown.

When asked about her motivation to continue her tree-sit, Miranda offers a response that clearly states her purpose. "I am inspired to keep going every single day that I am up here. I look out across a spectacular valley, across the upper canopy of the forest. There are constant reminders for me about why I am doing this and why I must continue - whether it's a wedge-tailed eagle soaring in the skies above, the beauty of snow falling on the tree tops or sound of a masked owl calling through the moonlit trees. Being in this tree every day for almost a year has strengthened my determination to continue, because I witness first hand the significant values of this incredible forested landscape."

It is apparent that Miranda is not going anywhere in a hurry. "Until there is a guarantee that these forests will be protected, I am committed to staying in this tree."

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