

Fact vs Fiction: Old Growth Forests and the RFA

1. UNDER the Regional Forest Agreement, the Commonwealth and State Governments undertook to establish a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) forest conservation reserve system for WA's forests. To guide the creation of the CAR reserve system, they adopted several 'Agreed Criteria'. One applies specifically to old growth forest, and it states that between 60% and 100% of remaining (current) old growth forest should be protected in reserves.
2. According to the Agreed Criteria, the amount to be reserved should increase from 60% towards 100% depending on how rare or depleted the old growth component of each forest type now is, and on the need to "[protect] high quality habitat", "[meet] specific community needs for recreation and tourism", and, crucially, "[protect] the largest and least fragmented areas of old growth".¹
3. Since the WA RFA process began in July 1996, instead of increasing old growth forest protection, governments and government agencies have consistently applied the 'flexibility' provisions of the Agreed Criteria to turn the 60% minimum into a 'target', or upper limit.
4. They have also redefined 'old growth forest' in a very narrow way, thus minimising how much old growth forest is said to currently exist and therefore how much needs to be reserved to meet the target. By substantially reducing how much old growth forest is said to exist in total, they can meet the 60% target with a far smaller area of old growth forest protected in reserves than should in fact be protected.
5. According to CALM's definition, WA has less than 10% (347,000 ha) of its original total old growth karri, jarrah, wandoo and tingle forest left as old growth forest. Conservation groups believe that, based on the broader, nationally accepted definition, there is about 15% left (~550,000 ha).
6. At the same time, the Government has also 'topped up' the amount of old growth forest said to be already protected by counting as 'old growth forest in reserves' the remnants of old growth forests left standing in narrow strips along streams and roads after clearfelling ('informal reserves').
7. This contradicts the expert scientific advice which the government claims underlies the RFA². A total of 57,000 ha of forest, including 20,400 ha of old growth forest, has thus been falsely 'accredited' as part of the CAR system, which, if finally adopted, means 20,400 ha less REAL old growth forest protected in REAL reserves.
8. By using these devices, the Government now claims that "58% of WA's current old growth forest is in reserves". As the table below indicates³, this is another fiction.

For most forest types, old growth forest is now a small, fragmented remnant of its original extent, and should therefore according to the Agreed Criteria be reserved at a level far higher than the minimum of 60%.

What is old growth forest (OGF)? It is the original, or primary forest. Our old growth karri, jarrah, tingle and

Forest type – some of the key forest types under the RFA	Original old growth (ha)	Current old growth (ha)	Proportion of original that is still old growth	Current old growth in genuine reserves (ha)	Proportion of original that is still old growth and in genuine reserves	Proportion of current old growth in genuine reserves	Current old growth in 'accredited' informal reserves (ha)	Proportion of current old growth in 'accredited' informal reserves
Jarrah Blackwood e.g. Ballan, Hilliger	347,200	48,496	17%	11,154	3.1%	23%	2,126	4%
Jarrah Leeuwin e.g. Forest Grove	56,400	477	2%	357	0.6%	75%	-	-
Jarrah North East	717,100	11,561	3%	4,277	0.6%	37%	510	4%
Jarrah North West e.g. Hester, Kerr, Lowden	670,600	7,923	1%	6,338	0.9%	80%	298	3%
Jarrah Sandy	107,900	2,171	3%	2,149	2.0%	99%	1	-
Jarrah South e.g. Long Peak, Rocky	557,300	160,667	36%	78,726	14.1%	50%	5,773	3%
Karri Main Belt e.g. Beavis, Gardner, Giblett, Hawke, Jane	193,000	53,576	32%	27,323	14.2%	51%	4,741 [This is slightly less than the total area of unprotected old growth karri forest in Jane and Giblett.]	9%
Karri Yellow Tingle e.g. Dawson, Ordnanee, Sharpe	15,800	6,969	52%	2,021	12.8%	30%	816	11%
Wandoo forest	363,200	7,856	5%	5,813	1.6%	74%	286	4%

wandoo forest ecosystems have evolved over millions of years and contain thousands of species interrelating to form a complex web of life about which we know very little. While ancient in origin, at any moment in time OGF ecosystems are comprised of individual organisms e.g. trees, fungi, birds, insects, that may be moments old, or hundreds of years old. Although individual organisms die and are replaced, old growth forest ecosystems do not 'die'. But they can be destroyed.

Essential characteristics of old growth forest include: biological diversity; structural diversity - leading to enormous variety of habitat (all native species found in our forests evolved in old growth forest habitats); unbroken evolution, and; naturalness and authenticity. OGF has unique values NOT found in post-logging regrowth. These include:

- Evolutionary, ecological and scientific values
- Economic values e.g. tourism, fine woodcraft, honey
- Aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values

Is old growth forest 'renewable'?

"It is not feasible to log old growth forests, as defined by the Inquiry, and yet retain their full complement of old growth attributes and values. Logging potentially violates the precautionary principle of sustainable development in that an irreplaceable resource is being destroyed..."⁴

"In the case of old growth forests that have been subjected to clearfelling, it may take several generations of the dominant overstorey, i.e. 1500-2500 years, to recover the full range of structural diversity present in uncut forest."⁵

What do logging, mining etc do to old growth forests?

- Construction of an extensive network of roads, leading to introduction and spread of dieback, predators, weeds, fire sources etc;
- Permanently remove some old growth characteristics, e.g. naturalness;
- Remove other characteristics for hundreds of years, e.g. structural diversity (trees with hollows);
- Fragment ecosystems and introduce degrading processes;
- Disturb soils and pollute freshwater ecosystems;
- Encourage frequent extensive 'prescribed burns'.

Conclusion

Based on CALM's figures, at the current rate of logging there is only about 15 years of old growth forest logging left. Industry restructuring is inevitable, and has in fact been proceeding for decades. CALM knew this in 1987 when it said:

"Within the next [20 to 40] years, the original native forests which have supplied most of our hardwood timber so far will be harvested ... The proposals contained in this strategy, if implemented, will result in structural change. Inevitably, this will result in some social and

economic disruption in some regional centres. There will be a progressive increase in the proportion of pine sawlogs derived from plantations as a consequence of the reduction in the quantity of old growth hardwood sawlogs... A sustained yield of sawlogs will be achieved by...⁵ substituting pine sawlogs for hardwood logs."⁶

We can and must make the transition to plantations and regrowth forest now, while we still have some relatively large and intact areas of old growth forest left.

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References

- ¹ Nationally agreed criteria for the establishment of a CAR reserves system for forests in Australia. Commonwealth of Australia. (1997).
- ² Report of the Commonwealth Scientific Advisory Panel examining the conservation role of road, river and stream reserves in the South West of WA. (1995).
- ³ All figures from Comprehensive Regional Assessment report. RFA Taskforce. (1998).
- ⁴ Resource Assessment Commission. (1992).
- ⁵ Conserving biological diversity in Australia's temperate eucalypt forests. Norton T.W. (1996). *John*
- ⁶ Timber production in WA - a strategy for the 21st century. CALM. (1987). ■

