

Tooloom National Park: wanton rainforest destruction by Forestry Corporation.

Dailan Pugh, North East Forest Alliance, March 2021

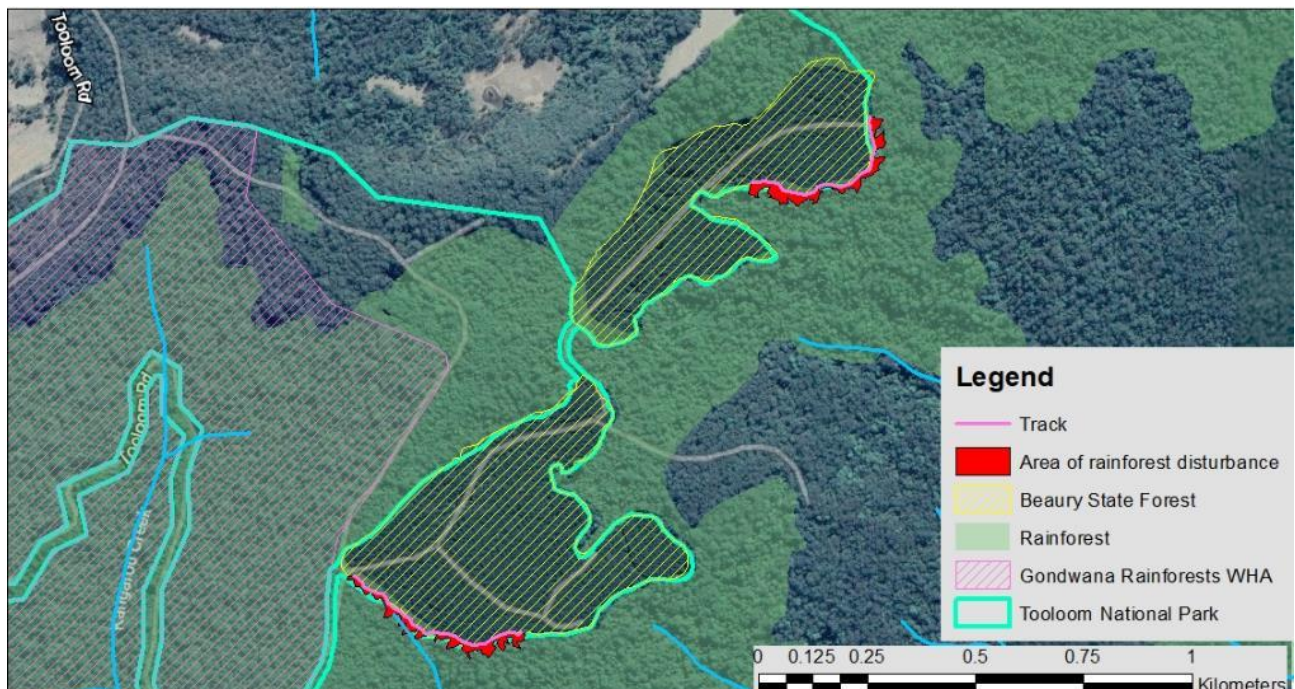
This report documents a preliminary assessment of part of a 5-6 hectare area of World Heritage value rainforest, mostly within the Tooloom National Park, that was wantonly and unnecessarily vandalised by the Forestry Corporation during the 2019-20 wildfires

The Forestry Corporation undertook widening of a track around the south and eastern boundary of a Hoop Pine plantation (Compartment 21 of Beaurie State Forest), likely in early December 2019. The plantation had been established by clearing rainforest, being “cookie cut” out of a large stand of subtropical rainforest in the late 1970s, so there was a low risk of the fire burning through the rainforest.

The track widening involved the indiscriminate bulldozing of hundreds of whole trees (up to 70 cm diameter) out of the ground, with crowns being pushed over 33m into the surrounding rainforest, in the process pushing loose soil into the remaining rainforest and damaging standing trees up to 2.5 metres diameter, killing many of them.

From the samples mapped, it is estimated that overall 5-6 hectares of rainforest has been cleared or damaged, with 4-4.5 hectares of this rainforest within the Tooloom National Park. This rainforest was assessed as qualifying for World Heritage listing in 2010. The damage is the result of wanton vandalism, with no attempt to minimise damage to the rainforest.

A responsible approach would have entailed limiting the damage to within the footprint of the plantation, instead all efforts were made to avoid any damage to plantation Hoop Pines with indiscriminate damage to adjoining rainforest, including in the Tooloom National Park.



It is requested that:

1. This event and the approval process be fully investigated, with appropriate and effective regulatory action taken to bring those responsible to account and ensure this never occurs again.

2. Rehabilitation be undertaken of affected rainforest, including control of erosion, removal of problem debris, and assisted regeneration of cleared areas.
3. An assessment be undertaken of other plantations in the region to see if there are other cases of wanton rainforest damage.
4. A policy be developed to rehabilitate these inappropriate plantation inholdings in rainforest, with retention of a high proportion of Hoop Pines and ingrowth at final harvest, and replanting of rainforest where needed.

BACKGROUND

Rainforest logging commenced in the region with Red Cedar in the 1870s, expanding into broad scale Hoop Pine logging in the early 1900's. In 1985 rainforest logging was stopped in the region with the closure of the Grevillea sawmill. In 1939 the Urbenville Reforestation Project was launched with the aim of converting most of the basalt plateau in the then Urbenville Management Area into pine plantations. Due to significant establishment problems, conversion was sporadic, with these plantations in Beaurie State Forest the last to be established in 1977/78.

When the national parks were established in this region from 1995-98 the plantations were excised, though in recent years the Forestry Corporation has been clearing them, failing to replant some and converting others to eucalypt plantations. In some cases the whole logs have been exported to China. They are not a high valued resource.

The Tooloom Scrub Flora Reserve (adjoining these rainforests) was created in 1986 and in December 1994 was added to the World Heritage listed Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia (CERRA). At that time the Government only added existing reserves. In 1995 most of Beaurie State Forest was converted into the Tooloom National Park. In 2007 the name of the world heritage property was changed to Gondwana Rainforests of Australia. In 2010 the NSW, Queensland and Commonwealth governments submitted a Tentative List of national parks, including Tooloom NP, to the World Heritage Centre which were proposed for future nomination as additions to the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage area.

It is thus evident that the affected rainforests are part of a large stand of rainforest qualifying as being of World Heritage Value. The Plant Community Types affected are Border Ranges Black Booyong Subtropical Rainforest (3003) and Far North Hinterland Kamala-Coogera Dry Rainforest (3070).

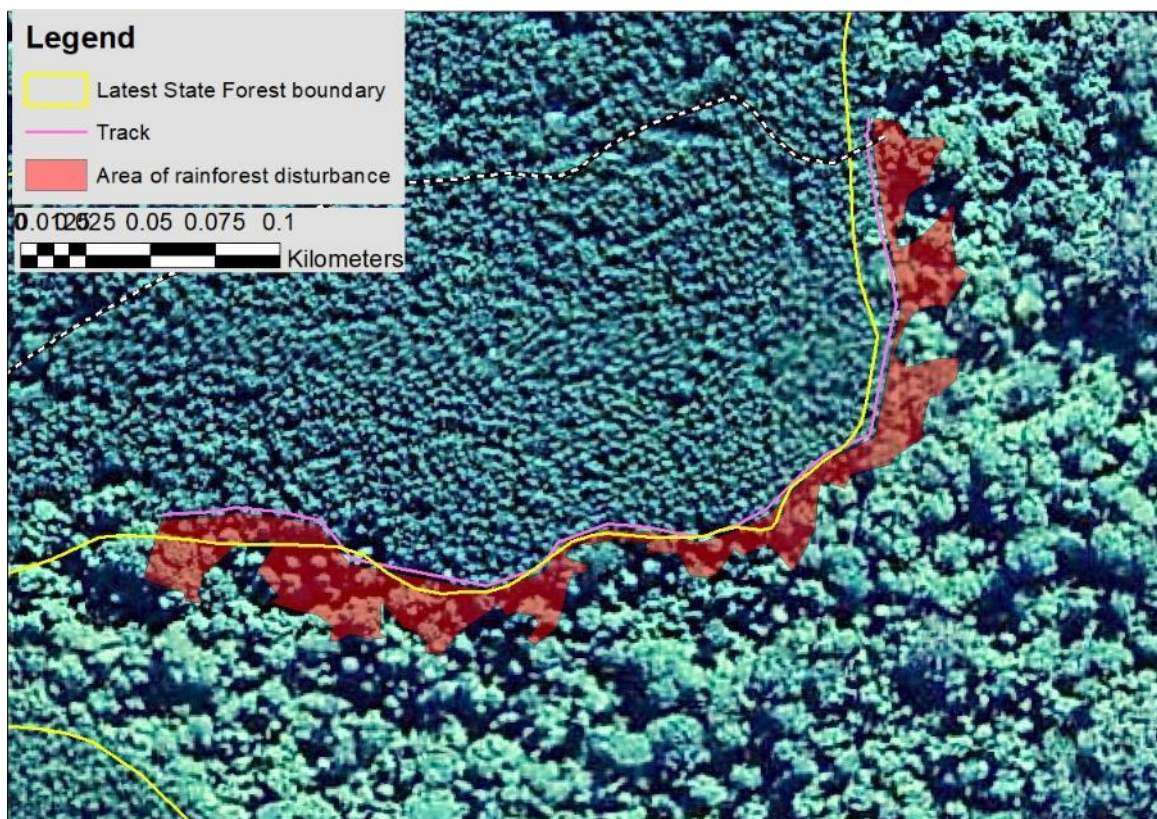
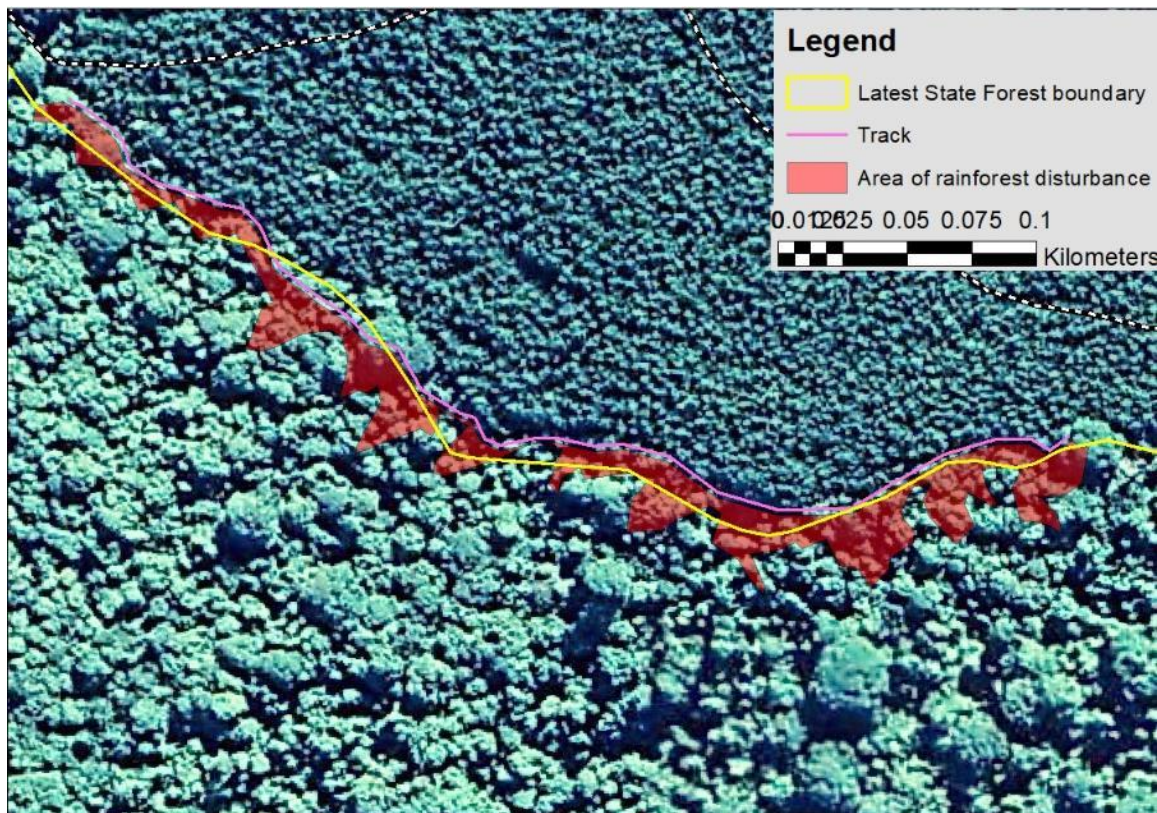
FINDINGS

In response to complaints made to NEFA about rainforest clearing, on Thursday 25 February 2021 Dailan Pugh and botanist Andrew Murray undertook a preliminary inspection to quantify the extent of the damage. It appeared that the clearing was undertaken over a year ago, likely around the time the Blue Gum Road Fire was burning in the vicinity in early December 2019.

Hundreds of trees (up to 70 cm diameter) had been bulldozed out of the ground, often directly into the rainforest. Many trees (up to 250 cm diameter) suffered damage to their bases, trunks and crowns, with some already killed and others likely to die in the future. Large areas had been cleared, with bared ground and loose soil bulldozed into the remaining rainforest, including around tree bases.

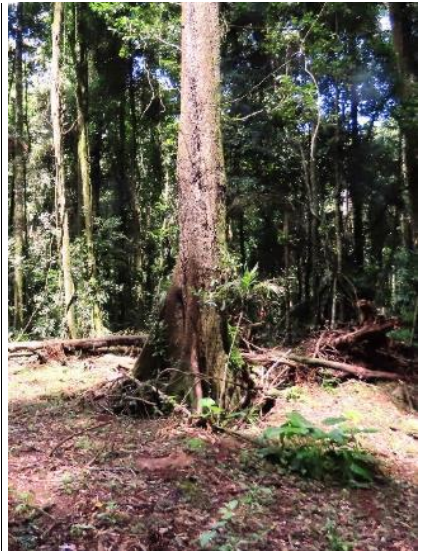
Two sections of the boundary totalling 890 metres were inspected, with the estimated edge of the original track identified with a GPS, and the boundary of identifiable disturbance (soil disturbance, tree trunks, tree branches) was mapped within the rainforest with a GPS. Within this area a sample

of dead and damaged trees were documented (Table 1) – it is emphasised that the documented 34 trees killed and 5 damaged are only a sample of the numerous trees affected.



Area of rainforest mapped as significantly disturbed (red) by GPS points, This was a year after disturbance so most pushed trees had long ago lost their leaves, meaning that boundaries of disturbance are conservative. (Note that the Google Earth images predate the disturbance)







Numerous trees were damaged and will likely die over time. LEFT: Strangler Fig (180cm dbh) and Flame Tree. RIGHT: Giant Stinging Tree (250 cm dbh) with significant damage.



Many dead trees were observed. LEFT: Black Booyong (85 cm dbh) likely died as a result of damage. RIGHT: One of many dead trees found, more than would naturally occur.

The area of damaged rainforest mapped was 1.4 ha, of which 1.1 ha is within the Tooloom National Park.

There is an additional 2.54 km of the boundary that has been similarly disturbed. Based on extrapolation of our sample, an additional 4 ha of rainforest is likely to have been significantly damaged, with some 3.1 ha likely to be within Tooloom National Park. Overall 5-6 (around 5.4) hectares of rainforest is likely to have been disturbed, with 4-4.5 (around 4.2) hectares of this rainforest within the Tooloom National Park.

Species	DBH	Easting	Northing	Accuracy
BULLDOZED OVER				
Black Booyong	48cm	441850	6849598	7.5m
Red Ash+Syzygium?	28cm, 31cm	441848	6849596	10.7m
Sapindaceae, Red Ash +3 others pushed off track	34cm, 35cm	441615	6849685	10.7M
Flame Tree	25cm	441783	6849603	11.8m
Lauraceae, Black Booyong	25cm, 32cm	441781	6849613	12.9m
Red Ash x2	25cm, 29cm	441824	6849583	7.5m
Red Ash, Lauraceae, Rosewood	18cm, 23cm, 21cm	441831	6849596	9.1m
Black Booyong	58cm	441894	6849611	7.5m
Black Booyong	41cm	442108	6849643	10.3m
Flame tree	33cm	441762	6849960	13.9m
Giant Stinging Tree, Sapindaceae, Lauraceae, Incense Cedar	24cm, 18cm, 21cm, 23cm	441752	6849608	17.9m
Koda	51cm	441679	6849646	12.3m
Flame Tree – mechanical damage	38cm	441636	6849685	7.5m
Giant Stinging Tree, Black Booyong	70cm, 21cm	441612	6849704	20.4m
Red Ash, Black Booyong, Grey Ebony	27cm, 34cm, 28cm	441564	6849973	56.5m
Syzygium sp	50cm	442543	6850635	12.7m
Black Booyong	68cm	442699	6850665	12.9m
STANDING TREES DAMAGED/KILLED				
Black Booyong, base and crown damage	62cm	441786	6849618	9.6m
Coogera dead from base damage	42cm	442658	6850649	10.7m
Strangler Fig (F.watkinsiana) crown damage	168cm	441932	6849619	12.7m
Black Booyong, killed	85 cm	442785	6850758	
Giant Stinging Tree, base damage	250cm	441672	6849665	
Giant Stinging Tree, base damage	240cm	441556	6849759	
Strangler Fig (F.watkinsiana), base damage	180cm	441579	6849734	

Table 1. Sample of trees killed and damaged. Note that this is just a random sample and not a comprehensive assessment.



Stream flowing down road.

In addition, a section of the reopened track was observed to follow a distinct drainage line, with water flowing along its length, from a series of wetlands above down to a small gorge below (442358 6850696). This section of road needs to be moved.

DISCUSSION

Clearing and damaging this rainforest was a significant act, as it not only involved clearing and damaging protected rainforest within Beaurie State Forest, but also a significant area assessed as being of World Heritage value within Tooloom National Park. Care was taken to avoid any damage to plantation trees, but destruction was careless and indiscriminate in rainforest.

It appears the rainforest degradation was undertaken around the time of the Blue Gum Road Fire in early December 2019. It is assumed that the intention was to somehow protect the plantation from the fire, either by allowing increased machinery ingress and/or creating a firebreak, or it could just have been an opportunity to widen the track. The mapped rainforest edge was generally hundreds of metres away, coming as close as 35m in one small area, therefore the risk of a fire burning through the rainforest into the plantation was small. In the vicinity of the plantation, the fire generally halted near the rainforest boundary, though to the south it burnt into the rainforest, stopping over 300 metres from the plantation.

It was a stupid act as the works would have increased sun and wind penetration into the rainforest thereby drying it, while creating a large mass of drying dead vegetation around the edge of the rainforest, extending from the ground up into the canopy, increasing the intensity of any ground fire and its likelihood of flaring up and jumping the track into the plantation. It was lucky the fire didn't reach the Forestry Corporation's perimeter bonfire. The works will have increased the fire risk to the plantation both in the short and long term.

The clearing and damage to world heritage rainforest in a national park, presumably by the Forestry Corporation or their agents, was a disgraceful act. It is not known who, if anyone, authorised the clearing. If it was during the fires it may have been under a Section 44 declaration with approval vested in an Incident Controller, though it would be outrageous if an Incident Controller approved the Forestry Corporation to clear rainforest in a National Park.

There needs to be an investigation into how this travesty was allowed to occur and who was responsible. Any people found guilty of wrongdoing need to be prosecuted. Measures must be taken to ensure this is not allowed to happen again.

There needs to be a reconsideration of the future of these plantations. They should never have been established on the basaltic plateaux, literally in the heart of the rainforest. With 27-37% of NSW's rainforests burnt in the 2019/20 fires, and the prospect of worse to come, it is essential we enhance the integrity of our rainforests as soon as possible. Over a century ago these rainforests were characterised by Hoop Pine towering to 50m tall over sub-tropical rainforest, but within decades those majestic Hoop Pine were mostly gone. Now the Hoop Pine plantations established at such high cost for the region's rainforests are being clearfelled and either left fallow as weed paddocks or converted into eucalypt plantations.

To restore the integrity of these rainforests, and avoid repeats of such appalling mismanagement, it is essential that these plantations be restored to rainforest as soon as possible.



Photo taken 19 February 2018 of Hoop Pine plantations in Compartment 202 of Toonumbar State Forest that were clearfelled in 2009 and apparently exported as whole logs to China. What were once majestic rainforests were converted to plantations and now have been left as a sea of weeds.

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