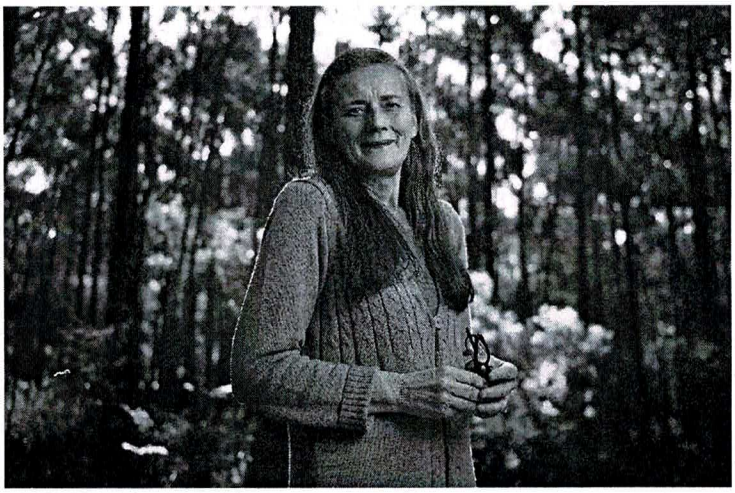
# Forest activist calls for change during feedback period on Central West Investigation



She became involved in the Wombat Forest campaign in the early 1990s and was instrumental in developing an audit program for forestry operations in Victoria, which led to investigations into the sustainability of forestry operations across the state, leading to a reduction in saw-log licenses.

And so, with this experience and the knowledge she learnt while completely a Bachelor of Forestry, Ms Duclos believes that despite the many opportunities the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Central West Investigation could have provided, it has fallen short.

## Community consultation:

Ms Duclos said the community consultation offered by VEAC had been questionable, as the drop-in sessions had involved one-on-one discussions with VEAC officers rather than open and transparent debate between officers and community members in a group setting.

She said this means of community debate had been successful before in the community, during the time which it had participated in respectful conversations with loggers to educate, thereby bringing about changes, to logging in the forest in the 1990's. This, she said, had successfully resulted in saw-mill licenses decreasing from 72,000 to around 8,000.

## Forest uses:

Additionally, Ms Duclos said the protection of forests and environmental assets should not come down to an all or nothing approach.

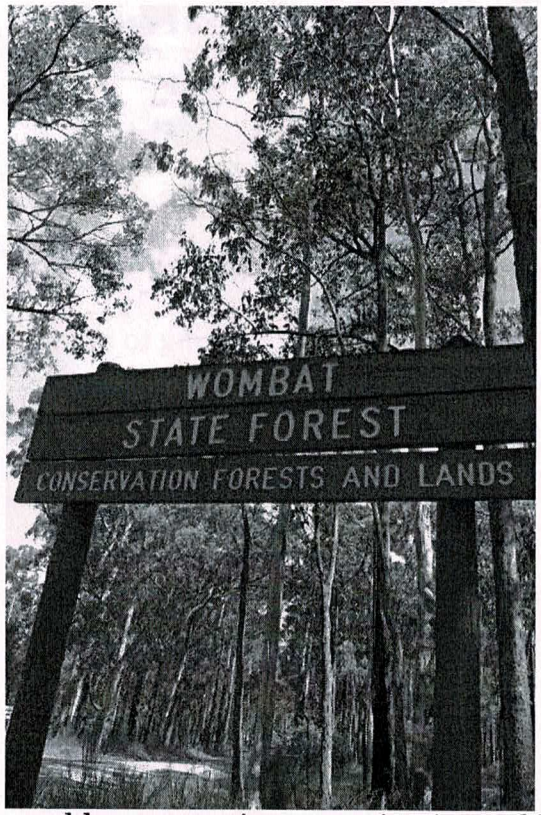
She said Wombat State Forest had been a 'working forest' from the days of the gold rush, however, it had been severely over-logged for woodchips which had resulted in its decline.

"It seems that people either want to chop everything down or lock everything up," she said. "But what we need is a middle of the road approach."

Ms Duclos said this was because a forest was always changing and therefore, not static.

She said a working forest required proper management and that rather than locking it up to ensure it was properly conserved, there should be a focus on teaching land users how to behave responsibly within it.

***If we truly wanted to benefit biodiversity and the full suite of environmental values we could come up with an ecological restoration plan for these forests and not simply change the land status***




## Climate change mitigation:

One of the other issues Ms Duclos sees with the investigation is the lack of climate change mitigation. She said many of the forests in the investigation area, including the Wombat, were in a "depauperate and structurally poor condition because they were subjected to decades of intensive, unsustainable logging".

She said many of the trees in the forests were in a suppressed state, meaning there are too many small diameter trees per hectare.

"Unlike the ash forests in the east, these drier forests do not naturally self-thin. To regain a more natural structure, the suppressed mixed species forests in the west must wait for a catastrophic event to kill some of the trees and allow those that remain to grow on."

She said if a catastrophic event like drought, disease or fire did not occur, then the suppressed forest would stop growing, meaning it would shift from storing carbon to releasing it back into the environment. This would see a decline in habitat and water catchment benefits.

"If we truly wanted to benefit biodiversity and the full suite of environmental values, we could come up with an ecological restoration plan for these forests and not simply change the land status," she said. "We created a poor quality forest by allowing it to grow back so quickly after industrial logging was stopped. We need an ecological forest restoration plan to fix what we have done."

She said change was vital with the onset of climate change, meaning more animals were migrating to different areas than they usually inhabited.

"If there are no habitat values in the forest, animals won't migrate. We need to expand the biodiversity."

## Firewood:

Ms Duclos said thinning a forest was required to ensure biological values and the species living within it were protected now and into the future, but it also offered many opportunities for sustainability.

She said it was better to thin the forest and allow people to look for firewood than it was to completely lock it up, meaning the forest would further decline.

"There is the potential to make biofuel, such as through providing the new anaerobic digester in Creswick with organic material to turn back into energy. Or there is the option to

leave the organic waste, after thinning the trees, on the forest floor to provide it with nutrients," she said.

## Economic assessment:

In terms of the economic assessments, or lack thereof, Ms Duclos believes that the investigation has been approached in a "very simplistic way".

"Apparently VEAC has commissioned an economic analysis of the timber industry in the investigation area, but a report on this will not be available until sometime down the track. There has been absolutely no consideration of the economic impact of the proposed recommendations on other users, including tourism," she said. "A total lack of available economic assessments means there will be no opportunity for community consultation around the economic impacts of recommendations coming from this investigation. This is very disrespectful to communities and those most directly impacted."

***People either want to chop everything down or lock everything up but we need a middle of the road approach.***

Loris Duclos

## Opportunities:

However, Ms Duclos believed there were a number of opportunities for Victorians to show foresight and innovation with land use management.

"I have a vision that we could declare these forests 'carbon forests'. This would involve restoring forests to their full potential thereby enhancing the security of all ecological values in a changing climate, including biodiversity," she said. "A forest restoration plan in Western Victoria could be prepared collaboratively with Aboriginal people from this area and include employment programs for young Indigenous people, thereby helping them to connect to country.

"A forest restoration program on public land could provide the impetus and be a model for restoration of forest species on private land, thus improving ecological values across the landscape."