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The Southern Forests Convergence by John Seed

Its exactly 20 years this month since I first visited Japan to give lectures about rainforest conservation and to try and raise awareness of the Japanese import of rainforest timbers.

A few weeks ago, the outstanding Tasmanian activists at the [Huon Valley Environment Centre](#) (HVEC) and [Still Wild Still Threatened](#) (SWST) organized the Southern Forests Convergence . These folks are the heart and soul of ancient forest protection in Tasmania and, as always, it's a great honour to work with them.

I have been involved in protecting the temperate rainforests of Tasmania since 1982 when the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (as it was then called), noted the success of our blockades to protect NSW's sub-tropical rainforests the previous year and invited our Nightcap Action Group to come down and help set up blockades to stop the damming of the Franklin River. (This turned into the largest environmental action in Australian history; more than 3000 people from all over the country converged on this remote wilderness and over 1500 were arrested before the dam was stopped.) A few years later I co-produced a film "Earth First" about this and other Australian rainforest actions for the ABC. This was shown around the world and helped spread the message of the rainforests far and wide.

More recently, Ruth Rosenhek, Director of Rainforest Information Centre has been supporting these activists through the "[Foster Feral](#)" program through which we have sent thousands of dollars down to the [blockade camps](#) in the Tasmanian rainforest. These young people care passionately for nature and face [intimidation and violence from the logging](#) contractors the likes of which I haven't seen in Australia in 35 years of activism.



Camp Flozza has been protecting the Florentine Valley for 5 years

Last year we also raised funds for HVEC's "Forest Life Survey Project" to scout the wilderness for previously unidentified High Conservation Value forests (HCV) to add to those forest areas already included in negotiations between logging companies, unions, conservationists and governments. Part of this scouting is the search for endangered species like the [Tasmanian Devil using motion activated cameras](#).

So little is known about these forests. While visiting Tasmania last year, I was taken to see the 100 meter tall "[Centurian](#)", the tallest tree in the Southern hemisphere. Though barely 2 hours from Hobart it wasn't discovered till 2008 (and though this individual tree is now protected, it sits within a coupe still slated for logging!)



Friday Feb 18, the day before the convergence began, there was an action in the threatened Picton Valley where cable loggers had been sent to clearfell an old growth forest area just weeks before a crucial moratorium deadline. Twenty five people took part in the protest; [Viv climbed a cable logger and forced the machinery to stop.](#)

The next day consisted of forest campaign planning sessions and updates, a live video link with US activist and author [Derrick Jensen](#) and presentations on Tassie forests' wildlife and on media skills.

Back in the 1990's the Rainforest Information Centre was one of many groups supporting the last hunter-gatherer tribal populations in Asia, the Penan who were blockading the logging companies destroying their traditional jungles in the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo . Some of us spent months in jail there for our efforts.

Now another Malaysian logging company, Ta Ann, has not only been



Penan logging blockade, Sarawak 1991

Viv camped up the cable logger, Friday

destroying rainforests in Sarawak but also those in Tasmania. Ta Ann is the biggest hardwood timber company in the world in terms of market capitalization. It has been able to achieve this through its close ties with the corrupt Chief Minister of Sarawak, Abdul

Taib, whose vast wealth and power has been amassed through the strategic distribution of timber concessions.

Taib is also finance minister and planning and resource management minister.

Earlier this month, the European NGO "Bruno Manser Fonds" (founded by the Swiss activist of Bruno Manser who lived in the jungle with the Penan from 1984 to 1990 and shared their struggle before mysteriously disappearing in Sarawak in 2000) released a [blacklist of 49 companies](#) in 8 countries (10 of them based in Australia) and is urging anti-corruption and anti-money laundering authorities in these countries to investigate any improprieties. This is being [reported in the Malaysian press](#) as follows:

["According to Malaysia's Democratic Action Party \(DAP\), Taib has failed to account for a staggering 4.8 billion Malaysian ringgits \(1.58 billion US dollars\) of Sarawak state funds over the past three years alone. In 2007, the Tokyo tax authorities uncovered a massive corruption scheme that involved the payment of kickbacks to the Taib family. In return, nine Japanese shipping companies had received export licences to carry logs to Japan, Sarawak's largest timber export market."](#) . And so on.

Ta Ann Holding's chairman is Taib's cousin, Abdul Hamed Sepawi. In 2008, Forbes listed Sepawi as the 30th richest man in Malaysia. Ta Ann holds 408,366 hectares of timber concessions, including the Raplex and Pasin timber concessions, which were previously controlled by Taib. They are also heavily engaged in the establishment of industrial tree plantations and oil palm plantations on Native Customary Land In Malaysia.

As Tasmania's main newspaper, The Mercury reported on Sat Nov 8 2008 p11:

"Ta Ann was lured to Tasmania by the cheap timber price offered by Forestry Tasmania.

Ta Ann chairman Datuk Hamed Sepawi told Tasmanian media in 2006 that hardwood from this state was cheaper than wood from Malaysian and Indonesian forests....

Ta Ann's deal with the State Government locked in the price it would pay for the timber at the 2006 level for the next 15 years."

Ta Ann has a wood supply contract for 265,000 m³ a year. It is estimated that Ta Ann is paying approximately US\$50 per cubic meter for these logs at a fixed price and then selling the product for US\$387 per cubic meter.



Tuesday's action at the Ta Ann veneer mill

In recognition of the recurring Malaysian connection, the films shown at the Forest Convergence on the Saturday night included two from the 1990's that spoke to this issue: "[Blowpipes and Bulldozers](#)" (the struggle of the Penan tribe against the logging of their traditional lands featuring an interview with Bruno Manser) and "[Melbourne Rainforest Action Group – A Time to Act](#)" depicting the courageous actions by MRAG and the maritime unions in 1991 to try and stop ships carrying those timbers from landing in Australia.

It is anticipated that the unions will once again play an important role in the struggle against Ta Ann who promised to offer local jobs when seeking permission to establish itself in Tassie but now lowly paid workers from Malaysia comprise an increasing proportion of its workforce.

Sunday morning there were planning sessions for Monday and Tuesdays actions and Sunday afternoon a benefit concert at the Brookfield Vineyard in Margate.

The venue was packed and the show opened with a few children's' songs from "[At Night They Howl at the Moon](#)" – an album of environmental songs for kids that Dana Lyons and I had made in 1993.

I hadn't seen Dana for years and this benefit for Tassies forests (one of about 30 gigs on the Aussie leg of his "[Three legged Coyote](#)" Tour) was such a fitting re-union. We had reminisced about our first meeting in 1987 at an Earth First! Festival at the Grand Canyon and how we had together played the Australian anti-uranium mining song "[Leave it in the Ground](#)" as hundreds of protestors joined in the chorus and we closed down the uranium mine located on the canyon's north rim as the festival's closing event.

This great song was written by Mook (Brendon Hanley) and to open the Margate gig that Sunday afternoon I sang two of Mook's kids songs from "[At Night They Howl at the Moon](#)" – "We don't want to Live in the Zoo" and "No more Bunya Nuts". Some of these activist kids had grown up with this album and it was so uplifting to have them sing along.

We were treated to the intelligent and relevant lyrics of local 6 piece band “Log Jam Fury” with an eclectic style of folk, reggae/roots, funk and gypsy punk, after which I gave a short deep ecology rave, performed Drew Dellinger’s poem, “[The Universe Jam](#)”, and introduced Dana.

Dana had sailed with the Sea Shepherd some years before and he introduced his [Sea Shepherd ballad](#) by inviting a rousing chorus of cheers for the announcement that Japan’s whaling fleet had retreated from the Southern Ocean a few days before [in the face of determined Sea Shepherd opposition](#). Many of the crowd who weren’t activists had come especially to hear Dana sing his animal rights classic “[Cows With Guns](#)” which had been a hit around the world in 1996, #1 on the Irish hit parade (spending 6 months in the Top 40) and #2 on the Australian charts.



Agata locked on, Hobart docks, Monday

of logging companies and their captive government bureaucracy, often under the threat of [violence from logging contractors](#)

Monday I had been scheduled to facilitate a deep ecology empowerment workshop for the forest activists in the Weld forest wilderness but it turned out they were already plenty empowered, had more important things to do and, instead, went to Hobart’s waterfront where Agata [locked on to a truck of rainforest logs](#) being delivered to a ship bound for China. They were [protesting](#) the bad faith shown by Forestry Tasmania whose logging operations have been targeting high conservation value forests just a few weeks before a moratorium that has been promised for March 15th. Our smaller than expected workshop was very beautiful nonetheless.

It was such a privilege and an inspiration to spend time among these young activists defending our ancient forests from the depredations

Tuesday there was [another action](#), this time at Ta Ann’s veneer mill in the Huon Valley rainforest. [Charlotte attached herself to a conveyor](#) to protest Ta Ann’s logging practices and work was stopped for about 3 hours.



Charlotte locked on, Ta Ann action, Tuesday

Miranda Gibson, 27, got out of the car Jeremy Eizell, 36, grabbed Datt and threw him to the ground, and Terrence Pearce, 34, kicked him to the head. Both men worked for Howells.”

One of the things that stands out about this movement is the number of women participating. Of the 30-some people at Tuesday’s action for example, 2/3 were female. I would like to conclude my story by briefly introducing 4 of them:

Among those present at the Convergence activities were

Miranda Gibson who has been involved in the Tasmanian forest campaign for the last four years. A long term resident of [Camp Flozza](#), the protest vigil which has been protecting the Upper Florentine Valley for 5 years. Miranda co-authored a book on the flora and fauna of the Florentine. Last year she was locked-on in a car with fellow activist and friend Nishant Datt when the car was smashed up by angry loggers with sledgehammers who were hauling logs for Ta Ann. [According to the Melbourne Age](#), 9 Oct 2010 “A Hobart magistrate yesterday described the assault, using a sledgehammer and steel-capped boots, as akin to a rampage.... [A video of the incident, shot from a concealed position by another protester](#), was described by magistrate Olivia McTaggart as confronting in its violence. Howells beat the car with a

sledgehammer, smashing its windows, as he demanded the protesters inside get out of his way. When Nishant Datt, 22, and

Especially worrying is the fact that the three perpetrators were released with a slap on the wrist – no jail or fine, just 70 hours of community service. What a travesty of justice. Nowhere but Tasmania ... The response of the Forest Industries Association a few days after this ugly assault was to “warn activists that they would be blamed for any violence in the forests at protests.” ([Tasmanian Mercury 28/10/2008](#))

She is at the forefront of Still Wild Still Threatened’s ongoing campaign to protect southern forests, often on the frontline and a key grassroots organiser.

Jenny Weber is one of the founders of the HVEC, which started 10 years ago focusing on the forests of the Huon. She is treasurer for HVEC as well as its main media spokesperson. Jenny has been the driving force for the HVEC since its inception as a volunteer for the entire time. Jenny helped establish the artist arm of HVEC, the [Black Sassy Collective](#), which runs the iconic Weld Echo art exhibition. Black Sassy has also run collaborative art exhibitions in Sydney and Melbourne. Jenny is a key figure in the Tasmanian forest campaign. Her experience and drive to protect the ancient forests of places like the Weld, Middle Huon, Picton and Esperence is matched by few. Jenny is a mother of 2 young children, who are at the core of her passion for forest protection.



Nitya occupying crane, Baram River Sarawak, 1991

participated in the blockade "Weld Valley Shutdown Action" preventing the logging of the Weld wilderness in 2007 she brought her artistic skills to the project and created what was to become an icon of this campaign, the “Weld Angel”. [Mounted on a tripod blocking the bulldozers out of the wilderness](#), she created such a poignant and unforgettable image that it brought attention to the issue far beyond Tasmania’s shores. Italy's Vogue Magazine published an 8 page spread on Allana's artistic

Nitya Rolfe played a prominent role in our actions a generation earlier against different Malaysian logging companies. She was part of a group of activists from the US, UK, Germany and Australia who travelled to Sarawak on the island of Borneo in 1991. They worked in solidarity with the Penan people to call a halt to the logging of their rainforest homes. As part of the campaign, the group locked on to cranes in the Baram River to stop the loading of rainforest timbers onto barges headed for export ships waiting offshore enroute to Australia and Japan. The group were remanded in custody for 2 weeks before trial and served 60 days imprisonment. The campaign to protect Sarawak's rainforests continued strongly throughout the 1990s. In 1992 Nitya worked at the Rainforest Information Centre to fundraise and lead a group of indigenous people from the Philippines, Sarawak and Australia to attend the Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro. She was then based in the U.K. working on global forest campaigns including the campaign to halt illegal logging of Mahogany in Brazil. In 1996 Nitya was one of the co-ordinators of Greens Senator Bob Brown's election campaign, and subsequently worked in his office for a number of years.

26-year-old Allana Beltran is an artist and a lover of nature. When she



The Weld Angel

action in conjunction with the forest's detailed campaign history which is amongst dozens of national and international newspaper and magazine articles, books on art and activism, television stories, documentaries, political forum's, radio shows etc. [Police and Forestry Tasmania sued her for \\$10,000](#) but their case failed.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Please email the Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke and the Tasmanian Premier Lara Giddings. Sample letters are appended.

If you want to do more, email the Hobart Mercury newspaper letters to the editor making the same points in your own words: www.themercury.com.au/opinion/letter-to-the-editor-submit.html

To the Federal Environment Minister:

Tony.Burke.MP@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister Burke,

I am writing to thank you for the Federal Government's involvement in the Tasmanian Forest Agreement and its support for protecting 600,000ha of high conservation value forests. For this process to succeed it needs the Federal Government to not only play a leadership role in facilitating the success of the agreement, but it also need funds to ensure that the HCV forests are managed properly in national parks. Please ensure that adequate resources are devoted to this important agreement so that Tasmania's ancient forests can finally get the protection they deserve.

regards
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To the Tasmanian Premier,
lara.giddings@parliament.tas.gov.au

Dear Premier Giddings,

I am writing to congratulate you for your Government's support for the historic Tasmanian Forest Agreement the potential it offers for protecting 600,000ha of high conservation value forests. For this agreement to succeed the government owned logging agency, Forestry Tasmania, must be instructed to implement a moratorium on logging all HCV forests while the final details of the agreement are sorted. Please ensure that this occurs as per the agreed deadline of March 15th, so that we do not loose any more of these ancient places. These forests provide habitat for a range of endangered species and deserve the highest level of protection in National Parks as soon as possible. A moratorium by March 15th will ensure we do not lose any more of these World Heritage quality forests.

regards
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