An Environmental History of Goonoo Forest

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About the author

The author lived in Dubbo between 2020-2025. He has a Biology Degree from the University of Adelaide and has worked at UNSW Library and NSW public libraries. He has published *Threatened Animal Species of NSW* (1992) and teachers manuals *Threatened Species Conservation in Schools* (1995) and *Biodiversity* (1996). He is a bushwalker who has made over 150 visits to Goonoo Forest, driven along most fire trails and walked along logging tracks, trail bike paths and creek lines in the forest. His observations are regularly recorded on the Goonoo Forest webpage http://goonooforest.au and Goonoo Forest Facebook page.

The information in this document is based on publicly available documents and some unpublished material held by the State Library of NSW, Macquarie Regional Library and the Dubbo Field Naturalist and Conservation Society Archives, as well as the experience of the author visiting the Goonoo Forest since 2020. If you have any suggested corrections or further information that you think is relevant to this environmental history the author would appreciate you contacting him via email at ken.klippel@gmail.com.

All photos in this document are taken by the author unless otherwise credited.

The author acknowledges the land of Goonoo Forest as Tubba Gah maing Wiradjuri Country.

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Introduction

When I first encountered the Goonoo Forest, I was surprised by both its size and its mostly wild nature in a landscape so heavily modified by human activities. I started to wonder "Why is this forest still here?" and was surprised to find that there was relatively little specific information available to answer this question. Here was a vast piece of virtually natural continuous habitat, one of the largest on the entire western slopes of the continent... and nobody had told its story.

The environmental history of the Goonoo Forest can be broken up into 5 different phases.

1. Geological formation and evolution of animal and plant communities and species over many millions of years resulting in a low fertility, low water retention environment.

2. Settlement of Indigenous communities in and around the forest from around 30,000 years ago characterised by long term sustainable use and management of natural resources.

3. Colonial settlement in the area from the 1830's characterised by temporary occupation and unregulated destruction of natural habitats leading to;

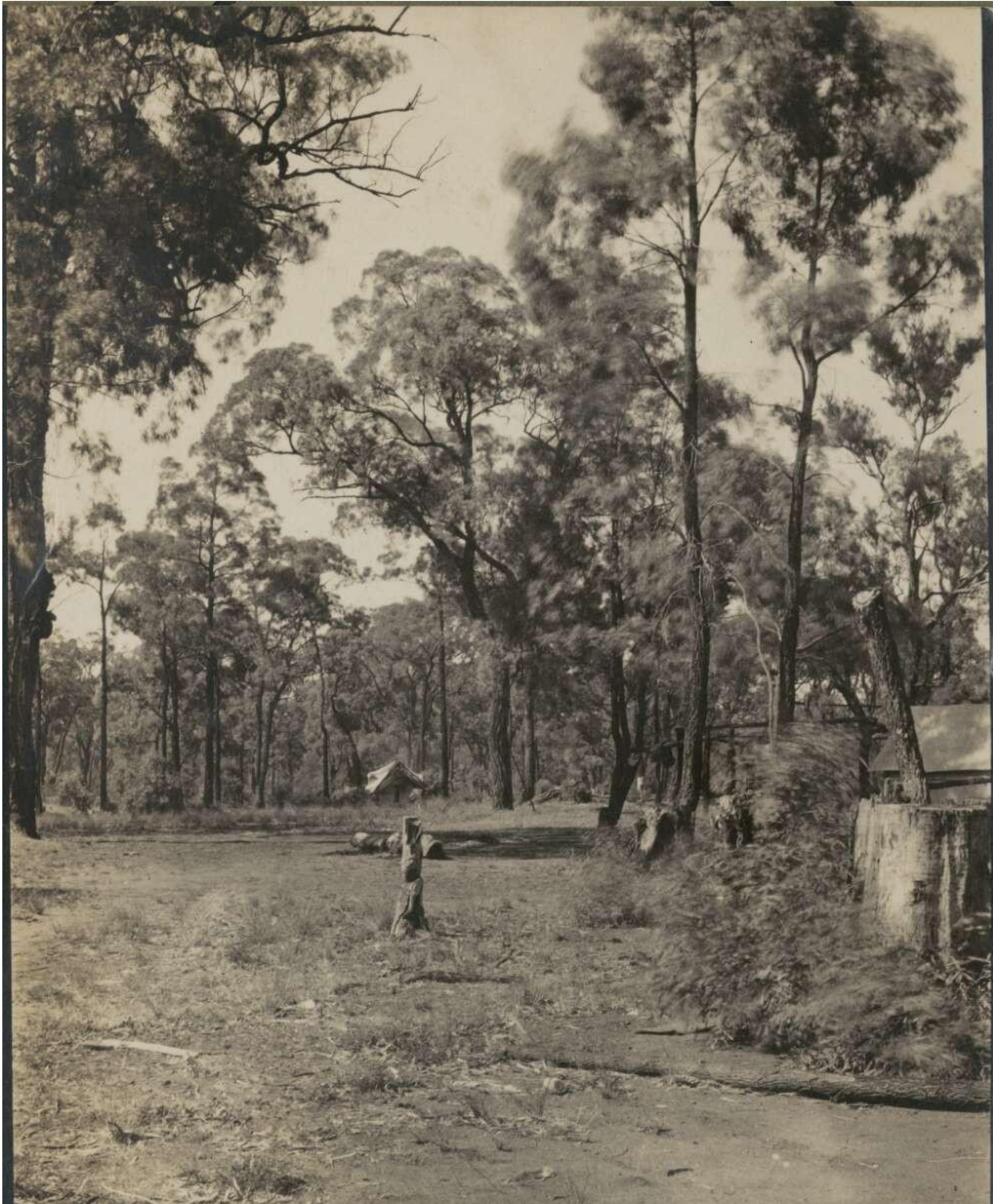
- Fragmentation of the forest and isolation from other forested areas.
- Wholesale removal of mature trees.
- Significant erosion along creek lines.
- Hunting pressure on native wildlife and introduction of feral predators.
- Removal of Indigenous people from traditional lands.

4. Management as a State Forest from 1917 to maximise harvesting of timber for commercial use.

- Reduced but ongoing removal of mature trees.
- Modification of plant community structure with selective clearing and changes to fire regimes.
- Addition of permanent water points encouraging invasive species to form sustainable populations.
- Increased access to remote areas via a network of fire trails, increasing spread of invasive species and supporting increased human infiltration.
- Increased awareness of the natural values of the forest and community pressure for greater conservation.

5. Conversion to partial conservation status and transfer of management to NPWS from 2005.

- Forest managed to prioritise conservation of species and natural habitats.
- Greater surveillance and monitoring leading to a reduction in destructive activities
- Management programs introduced for control of invasive species.
- Increased promotion and usage of the forest for non-destructive purposes.



Through the ironbark forest, Dubbo Region, New South Wales, ca. 1915 [E.C. Kempe. SLNSW]

The Goonoo Forest

The Goonoo Forest is a large Ironbark gum forest of 65,000 ha located around 30km north-east of the city of Dubbo on the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range in NSW. It covers an elevated sandstone ridge lying between the valleys of the Castlereagh River in the north, the Talbragar River in the south & east and the Macquarie River in the west. The forest has no permanent waterways and is surrounded by mostly cleared farmland used for cattle/sheep/goat livestock and grain crops.

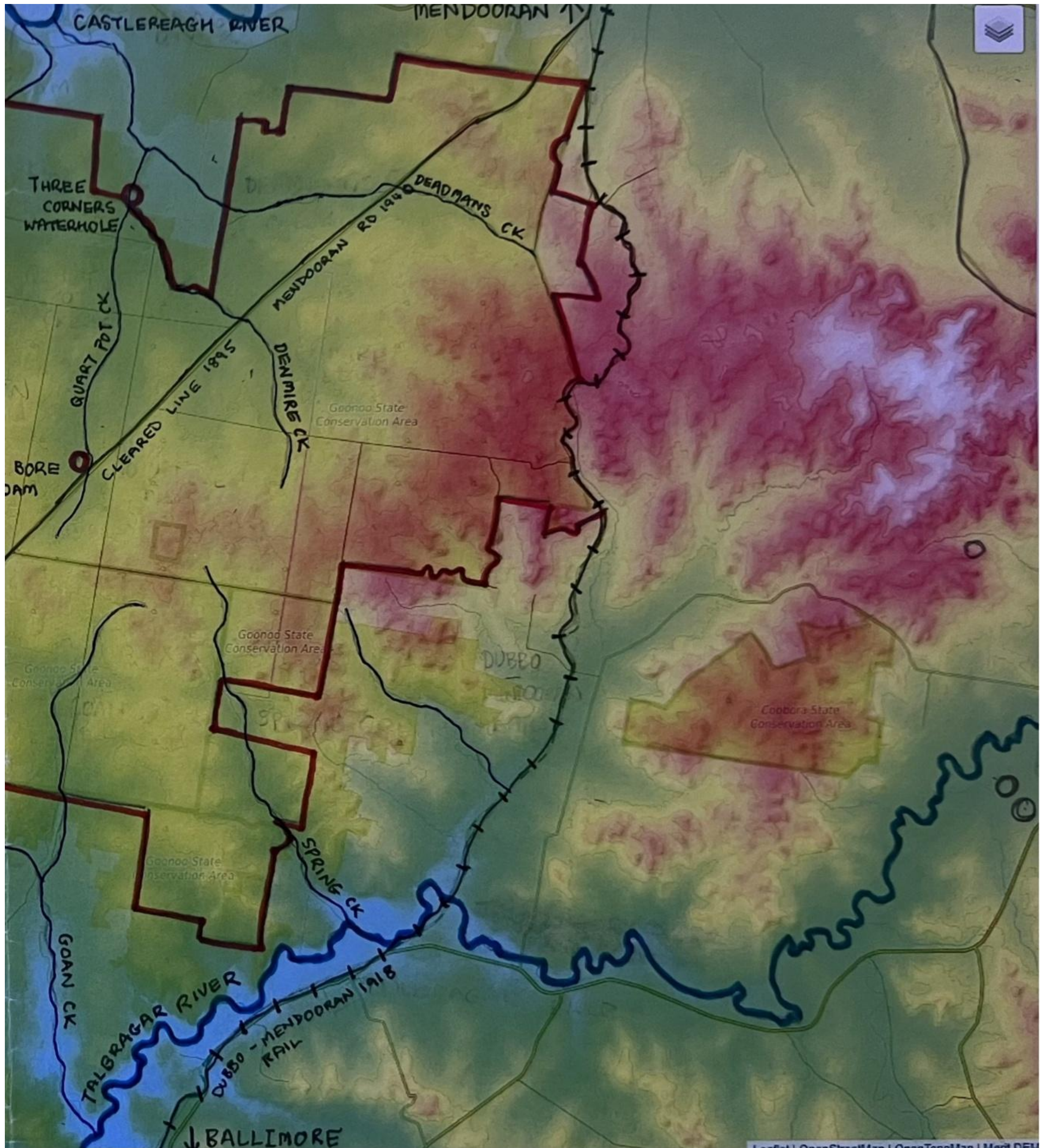
The Ironbark of the forest (Eucalyptus crebra, E. nubile & E. sideroxylon) and other timbers were extensively logged from the mid-19th C to 2005, principally as a State Forest from 1917. Since 2005 it has been managed for conservation purposes by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS). Before colonial times the forest was part of an extensive band of medium density, tall forests and woodlands that extended along the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range from inland of Mackay in Queensland to western Victoria. It occupies an east-west transition zone between the arid woodlands of the Darling plains in the west and the moister tall forests of the Great Dividing Range in the east, as well as a north-south transition zone between the Brigalow woodlands to the north and Box woodlands in the south.

Ironbark is a slow growing, tough, durable and termite resistant timber favoured for heavy construction use as railway sleepers, bridges and wharf piles. It is well adapted to dry, infertile soils and natural fire cycles. Almost 700 species of plants have been identified from the forest including several threatened plant species. Aside from the extensive Ironbark forests it contains large areas of Black and White Cypress Pine (Callitris spp.), Dwyer's Red Gum and Box Gum along creek lines, stands of Green and White Mallee (Eucalyptus spp.) and heathy mixed low shrublands. Over 170 bird species have been recorded in the forest including the endangered malleefowl, the only known location where this bird is known to breed outside of mallee communities. Viable populations of several other threatened and at-risk species are known to live in the forest including Glossy Black Cockatoos and Turquoise Parrots. It has been identified as a hotspot for bat species with at least 9 species being recorded.

The forest is very much a boom-and-bust environment. When conditions are good, i.e. during wet times, the number and range of animals and plants to be found in the forest are much higher than during the intervening dry years. Many species use the forest on an impermanent basis, either as seasonal migratory visitors or as dispersal areas after good seasons.

Location of Goonoo Forest on western slopes, NSW

Western section of Goonoo Forest showing locations included in this document



Eastern section of Goonoo forest showing locations included in this document

Ironbark Forest

Box Woodland along creek flats

Mallee woodland

Dwyer's River Gum along creek line

Chain of ponds formation on Gilgai terrain

Heathy low mixed shrublands

Geological Beginnings

450 million years ago the area covered by the Goonoo Forest lay beneath the depths of an ancient ocean. Over the next 150 million years the land was uplifted by a combination of tectonic plate movements and volcanic activity into a series of north-south mountain ranges and troughs culminating in the formation of the Sydney-Bowen basin in the Permian period, a shallow depression of flood plains and swamps stretching eastwards to the long-retreated Ocean. During this period, mineral-rich deposits of gold and other precious minerals were deposited in the area by volcanic activity and vast beds of coal formed from the vegetation that grew in the swamps. Remnants of these deposits now lie hundreds of metres below the floor of the forest.

By the Jurassic period (about 150 million years ago) the basin had expanded northwards to form a long inland sea running all the way to the north coast of Australia, the preliminary formation of the Great Artesian Basin. Erosion of the surrounding land over following millennia filled the basin to a depth of up to 100m with Pilliga Sandstone, a mix of sandstone and quartz pebble conglomerate washed down large, braided rivers. These are the rocks that make up the surface of the Goonoo Forest area today. Pilliga Sandstone produces very poor sandy soils which accounts for why this large tract of forest has never been extensively cleared for agricultural use.

Around 75 million years ago the Gondwana continent began to break up, and the Australian continental plate started to drift northwards. Extensive uplifting occurred along the east coast as the Great Dividing Range began to form. Around 15 million years ago this process was enhanced by a period of extensive volcanic activity (e.g. Warrumbungles, Mt Canobolas) and by 12 million years ago all the main river valleys (i.e. Macquarie, Castlereagh, Talbragar) were in place and the landscape first started to resemble that of today. Five million years ago the forest was much wetter than today, comprised of cool temperate rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest similar to that now found further east.

By around 35,000 years ago, the land was covered by sclerophyll forest similar to today and there were still some megafauna (e.g. Diprotodon) and other extinct marsupial species. The Australian continent went through a glacial period where the climate was becoming cooler and drier and by 20,000 years ago the sclerophyll forest had been replaced by a low shrubland of chenopods, such as saltbush and bluebush, daisies and grasses, very similar to the vegetation

of far west NSW today. With the end of the glacial period and the return of warm wetter conditions the sclerophyll forest gradually returned.

The picture below illustrates the three main geological processes that produced the Goonoo forest area. In the foreground are beds of whitish sandstone, laid down at the bottom of an inland sea. Above this are reddish layers of conglomerates produced when the area was covered in fast moving streams. These deposited pebbles eroded from long-gone mountains to the east and south. At the top of the photo is a layer of loose sandy material deposited by wind and flood in more recent times.

This photo illustrates the three main geological processes that produced the Goonoo forest area. Further explanation in text above

First Nations

Aboriginal people arrived in the area around 35-30,000 years ago. At this time the forest was dry with few permanent or reliable water sources. It is unknown if Aboriginal camps in the forest were occupied all year round. More permanent and larger camps were located along the Talbragar, Castlereagh & Macquarie River valleys around the forest where water and food were more plentiful. Most known occupation sites within the forest are along major creek lines (e.g. Goondy, Branch, Ranters & Denmire in the west; Spring, Deadman's & Goan in the east). Tracks along these and other creeks were used to move between the major river valleys, and subsequently by settlers and loggers to access the interior of the forest.

Aboriginal people actively managed specific locations along creek lines where water could be kept for longer periods by maintaining chains of small ponds. They had detailed knowledge of locations where water was available close to the surface of dry creek beds. Periodic small scale burning in these areas would also encourage animals to feed and drink where they could be more easily caught. It is unlikely that extensive burning of most of the heavily forested areas was carried out.

By the time of European colonisation, the forest roughly marked the boundary between two different Aboriginal nations, the Kamilaroi to the north and the Wiradjuri to the south. The Wiradjuri clan that used the Ironbark forests around Dubbo, the "people of the Ironbark", were known as the Munga. The Munga used the full range of plant and animal resources available within the forest, with an intimate knowledge of flowering/ fruiting times and seasonal/migratory changes to animal populations. In Goonoo the Munga hunted kangaroo, wallaby, emu, goanna, echidna, possum, lizards, snakes and birds including malleefowl using "bundies", small throwing sticks with a club-like end about a metre long. Witchetty and kangaroo grubs were collected from wattle and gum trees. Crayfish were caught in waterholes, and honey was made into a drink called "gullanjury" with water.

A range of plants were also gathered, particularly yams, the roots from several different types of plants. Fruits were collected from the forest including quandong, bumbil (native oranges – Capparis spp.), gang gang (native lime), native bananas and berries from emu or currant bush. The gum from mistletoe and wattle was also eaten. Plants also had uses apart from food. Sap was used for lamps, sealants and glue. The bark from wattle trees was used in tanning skins. A range of plants were used as bush medicines. Quinine (Alstonia spp.) roots were boiled up and used for sores. Honey was used for burns. Wood from the leopard wood tree was chewed for

toothaches. Boiled Rosewood (Alectryon spp.) leaves were boiled then taken for colds. Arrowroot or wild orchid bulbs and pods were used as a treatment for diarrhoea.

The Munga utilised timber from the forest for shelter, weapons, tools and vessels. There is a significant number of scar trees throughout the forest which bear witness to these uses as well as markers for ceremonial use, significant sites, boundary lines and burials. Mallee wood from Goonoo was especially prized for making didgeridoos. Stone rubbing grooves are found on sandstone shelves near creeks and there are also a small number of ochre quarries in the forest.

Some local histories suggest that all the Wiradjuri people in the Dubbo area, including the Munga, left their lands and relocated to the Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve by the late 1880's. However, the Munga and their descendants continued to visit the forest regularly for many years, if not to the same extent as in the past. The oral histories of descendants of the Munga show that they maintained strong links to the forest throughout the 20th C. Many worked as timber cutters and there was a strong ongoing tradition of hunting traditional bush foods right up until the late 20th C. Traditional ceremonies continued to take place regularly in the forest until at least the 1940's and are known to have been carried out in the 21st C.

In 2016 an Indigenous Land Use Agreement between Tubba-Gah Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation and NSW NPWS was signed to implement sustainable practices in Goonoo into the future. The forest is now acknowledged as Tubba Gah maing Wiradjuri Country.

Worked stone tool

Quartz flake from tool site

Tool sharpening grooves

Ochre beds on a creek

Coolamon bark scar

Modified tree scar

Bark removed for shelter or board to dry skins

European Contact

The first Europeans visited the area around 1818, five years after the Blue Mountains had been crossed by colonists. They were searching for good farming land so little attention was paid to the thick Ironbark forests along the ridges to the north of the Macquarie River. Over the next 20-30 years the colonists spread into the country, exclusively along the larger river valleys of the Castlereagh, Talbragar and Macquarie Rivers where the soil was more productive and there was a regular supply of water. The soils of the forest were too thin, sandy and dry for good farming. Colonisers began to clear the mainly Box woodland and mallee scrub in the valleys and harvest trees along the edges of the forest for housing, fencing and bridges.

By the 1870's the direct effects of nearby settlement on the environment of the forest had been negligible except for the ongoing alienation of the Munga people from their land and traditional land management practices. There was a flurry of activity in the previous decade or so when gold fever had gripped the country and every creek line and rocky outcrop was investigated and tested. Nothing payable was discovered in the forest but accessible seams of coal were identified along the eastern edges of the forest and these would begin to be mined in the 1880's.

The expansion of the railway network into rural Australia in the 1870's was the largest infrastructure project the country had seen. Railway construction required large numbers of hardwood sleepers, (~1,500 sleepers per km) and one of the best hardwood timbers for this use was Eucalyptus Ironbark. The Ironbarks of the forest became a prime source for the railway network's expansion into the north-west and west of NSW.

With the arrival of the railway in Dubbo in 1881 and its subsequent expansion northwards along the western fringes of the forest to Coonamble in 1903, the extraction of mature Ironbarks and other timbers from the forest boomed. The scale and effects of this operation were enormous. Just for the 160km Dubbo-Coonamble line, 250,000 sleepers were used, requiring over 10,000 mature trees to be felled. A significant proportion came from Goonoo as one of the prime sources of good quality hardwoods in the area. At the turn of the19th century it was estimated that over 300 sleeper-cutters were working in the forest at any one time and towns along the Coonamble line such as Eumungerie & Mogriguy grew to populations of over 300.

As the supply of good hardwood timber near these towns started to dwindle, the sleeper-cutters started to move deeper into the forest proper, principally along the western creek lines of Denmire, Ranters, Branch and Goondy Creeks. This period of intense and virtually unregulated

logging continued up until WW1. During this time tens of thousands of mature Ironbarks were removed from the forest, having significant long-term environmental effects.

The sleeper-cutters never erected any permanent structures in the forest, mainly because of the lack of a reliable water supply. Living in adjacent settlements they would make forays along the creeks from surrounding areas, setting up small temporary camps in and around the forest such as at Three Corners Waterhole in the north of the forest. Often their wives and children would accompany them. They targeted the oldest, tallest and straightest trees to be debarked, trimmed and cut to size before being carted to nearby railway settlements for transport to sawmills and depots.

Detailed descriptions of the sleeper-cutters' camps in the first few decades of the 20th C were recorded by the members of the Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd, an Anglican order whose ministers visited remote and sparsely settled areas throughout the west of the state. Here is a description of a sleeper-cutter's dwelling from their *Bush Brothers* journal of 1908.

> *" A rough framework of poles is fixed straddle-wise and braced together with cords. This is covered with tarpaulin or canvas or bags, or in fact anything. Where gaps occur, or to improve the shelter, boughs are laid on the top, and the thing is done. The inside, too, is soon furnished. Two planks or pieces of a packing case make a table, the legs may be left in the rough, as they are cut from the nearest tree; boxes or tins serve for seats, and the stores are stowed under the low parts of the roof. Frying pans and other sundries hang from the rafters. That completes the furniture of the first apartment. The inner division or second chamber of the tent contains beds, sometimes a wire mattress resting on two boxes, sometimes simpler couches spread on mother earth. A candle stuck in a bottle mounts guard over this chamber.*
>
> *There is not time for too much household decoration, things are for use and not for ornament, it may be necessary to strike camp any day, and all that will be left to show the site of it is the frame-work of poles, stark and naked by the track from which the wheel marks are fast fading, where the sound of the axe is heard no longer, and the silence of the Bush reigns once more undisturbed.*
>
> *... the camps are hard to find; they are there one month and gone the next. The timber suitable for sleepers is all cut, or the water supply has failed, and they have pitched in another part of the bush, perhaps 20 miles away."*

Accessing and transporting the best timber for sleepers in such a dense and rugged environment was a major problem for the early cutters, which was never really resolved until after WW2 with the construction of the Mendooran Road and expansion of the State Forest fire trails network. Before then they used the Indigenous tracks that crossed east-west between the Castlereagh and Talbragar River valleys and the ”cleared line”, a rough north-south track made in the 1890’s through the forest from Dubbo to Mendooran. Until the introduction of the motor car in the early 20thC, bullock and horse drays were the only ways to transport cut logs to the railway and markets. Proposals to build tramways from the forest to Dubbo and later to nearby villages were periodically raised from the 1890’s. Here is another excerpt from the Bush Brothers journal of 1909 of a trip up the ”cleared line.”

> *" The track was heavy and travelling uninteresting. We wished for the “29 mile.” At last, the long looked-for peg showed up, but no camp. … When the “31 mile” was reached, the situation was still the same, no camp, no water.*
>
> *The weather had cleared a bit, so we decided to pack up and move on. Everything was wet; we walked alongside of the sulky, the track was awful. The road in off the cleared line we thought every moment we would get bogged. Down to the axle a few times. … As soon as the camp was reached we were made welcome.”*

Relics of the sleeper cutters can still be found throughout the forest, small, cleared areas along the old winding logging trails dotted with piles of thin slivers of ironbark produced when the fallen log is shaped into a sleeper. In places there are rafts of thin poles spread out on the ground where timber was stacked to dry before transport, and elevated docks where the timber was loaded onto the backs of drays and later trucks. There are rusty tin cans and old bottles for sauces, cordials, preserves and tinned meat. Remnants of the domestic nature of the camps include billies, broken china, toiletry bottles and children’s toys.

The sleeper cutters supplemented their diet by hunting. There are reports from the 1890’s of sleeper cutters sustaining gunshot wounds in the forest while hunting kangaroos and malleefowl. Prickly pears (cacti) were planted at camp sites as a source of vitamin C and they remain as a minor invasive species today.

Sleeper-cutter's Forest camp in Breelong State Forest, now Breelong National Park 1928 [SLNSW]

Sleeper Cutters in the forest 1912. [Bush Brother Vol. 8 No. 3]

Sleeper Cutters Camp at Eighteen-mile Camp 1912 [Bush Brother Vol.8 No. 3]

Foundation stumps of late 19th C inn at sleeper cutters camp, Three Corners Waterhole

Creek erosion from early logging

Example of early wastage - mature tree felled for just 1-2 sleepers

The primary purpose for the expansion of the railways was not to support the development of a timber industry, but rather to open new areas for farming communities based on crops and livestock. The ideas of "closer settlement" and "peopling the land" were entrenched in early Australian governments and political discourse and the forestry industry was very much seen as playing a supportive role in clearing the land for agricultural use. Even though Ironbark grew on poor soils the clear-felling of individual trees and smaller patches was encouraged by land managers, advice and policies, a situation that continues today. Throughout the 20th C and particularly after WW1 & WW2 small holdings were established along the edges of the forest. Many of these were unsustainable and ultimately later subsumed into the State Forest.

Most of the 15-20,000 ha of original ironbark forest between today's Breelong National Park and the conserved areas of the Goonoo Forest have been cleared since the 1880's, when there was a change in agricultural production from large grazing properties to smaller crop-based selections. The arrival of the first traction engine in the area in 1901 particularly sped up the removal of scrub and woodland. Additional clearing of other nearby forest types such as the Eucalypt Box woodlands of the river valleys exacerbated the fragmentation and isolation of the Ironbark forests and other natural habitats, leading to local extinctions and significant changes in the biodiversity of the area.

The richness of the area before the encroachment of European agricultural practices is shown by this following description of the life of small settlers around the turn of the 19th C.

> *"The bush was full of wallabies and mallee hens, whose mounds were found everywhere. Sunday dinner was often two mallee fowls and children would dig up the eggs from nests for cooking ... There were literally groves of quandong trees around the district; free of grubs, the fruit made excellent jam and pies to vary the menu of the pioneer settlers"*

Stone farm wall

Abandoned Sunshine harvester c. 1900

Early settlers fireplace

Example of early fencing in the forest

Goonoo State Forest

By the mid 1880's there were already calls by politicians and community leaders in local newspapers for state management of forest resources in the Dubbo area, citing indiscriminate and uncontrolled harvesting by sleeper-cutters. Subsequently a patch of 15,000 ha in the north of the forest was declared a Forest Reserve in 1884 requiring loggers cutting timber in that area to be licensed. Policing of this requirement over such a large and isolated area was however difficult. Expanding this reserved area was slow, as the state forestry division was a sub-division of the Lands Department which maintained a "land for farming" closer settlement policy. Calls for further reservation of the forest to protect its timber resources continued as the depression of the 1890's exposed the over-reach of clearing marginal lands for farmland, and the sleeper-cutters began to expand further into unprotected forest areas. In 1895 a further 18,000 ha of Forestry Reserve was added to the earlier reserve and finally in 1902 Forest Reserve No. 34219 of 55,000 ha was proclaimed covering the core of today's conserved area.

The proclamation of Forestry Reserve 34219 not only provided a level of protection for the forest's resources from unrestrained logging. As reserved land, it also protected the forest against further encroachment for settlement and homesteads. This would prove to be significant in the early-mid 20th C as calls for a major road through the centre of the forest increased.

Even with the replacement of horse and bullock drawn drays by motorised trucks, it became increasingly less profitable in the early 20thC to harvest and carry timber to the railway line in the west. A plan from 1891 was resurrected to propose a tramway from Mogriguy to the forest. Attention also turned to the eastern side of the forest, principally the timber along Deadman's and Spring Creeks. In 1913 there was talk of building a tramway from Dubbo to Cobbora and to build dams in the east side for sleeper cutters. Bores were sunk along Deadman's Creek but were unsuccessful. There was also considerable discussion at the time about where to locate a rail link along the eastern edge of the forest between Dubbo and the northern line through Mendooran. This line eventually opened in 1917 but for a variety of reasons, including a lack of sidings, a drop in demand for hardwoods and the low productivity of the forests in the immediate area, the logging industry in the east never developed to the same extent as in the west.

The NSW Forestry Commission was formed in 1916 with a mandate and budget to manage the State's forests for long-term sustainable timber production. The following year Forest Reserve

No. 34219 was proclaimed as Goonoo State Forest No 436 and Mr. A. E. Samuels became the first Dubbo District Forester responsible for its management. Samuels was from a local family, had worked locally for the nascent Forestry Commission since the turn of the 19th C. and would continue as District Forester for the area until retiring in 1941.

Within a few months of taking up the position Samuels outlined his major priority in a report for the local newspaper, "Combatting the Bush Fire Evil". He proposed the following:

- Construction of a series of fire breaks, running north-south, particularly in the western parts of the forest, at right angles to the prevailing westerly winds and along higher ridges.
- Firebreaks in the west and south would be of 5 chains (100m) width, and 3 chains (60m) in the north and east.
- Division of the forest into 500-acre blocks by clearing 11 ft (3m) wide fire lines west-south and 1 chain (20m) for north-south lines
- Existing loggers' tracks, creeks and watercourses would be cleared of all inflammable matter.
- Appointment of an overseer with a small gang of men to maintain fire breaks. The overseer should have a residence with a water supply and observation station.
- All workers and loggers would require a license, with heavy penalties for unlawful use of the forest and careless use of fire, which would be stringently enforced.

In contrast to today, the greatest fire danger to the forest and surrounding properties was perceived to be the local farming practice of burning off, associated with wholesale clearing of surrounding land for agricultural use. Samuels' report also contained suggestions for the formation of local fire brigades and other actions farmers should take as responsible neighbours of the forest.

The following year (1918) a massive fire affecting 80% (40,000 ha) of the forest took 3 weeks to get under control. Despite this catastrophic event progress with the firebreaks was slow and it was not until the mid-1920's that Samuels could claim that his measures were satisfactorily in place, although it seems that the major firebreaks never achieved the widths he originally planned. Despite another devastating fire in 1938 (11,000ha) Samuels was able to report in 1939 that his fire protection measures had led to a "tremendous increase in the regrowth of all species".

The other major factor limiting Samuel's ability to fight forest fires was the lack of water in the forest. By the early 1920's a bore with windmill had been established at the forestry camp at No

1 Bore (now known as Riley's Dam) but the next two major dams, No. 2 Bore and Paddy's Dam were not installed until the mid-1930's. These permanent water points and the other dams that would follow had significant effects on the wildlife using the forest. Water dependant animals such as marsupials and some species of birds, (particularly seed eaters such as emu, finches, pigeons and some parrots), benefitted from this permanent supply allowing them to maintain larger viable populations in the forest. Unfortunately, the dams would also come to benefit introduced mammals such as rabbits, pigs, goats, foxes and cats, all of which have had significant and ongoing negative effects on the natural wildlife, either through predation or landscape damage.

The State Forest rangers and workers also carried out a range of other practices in managing the forest to maximize Ironbark growth, which included the planting of seedlings, ringbarking of "useless" trees and thinning. Reflecting the poor understanding of forest ecological dynamics of the time, one of the earliest practices was the removal of leaf litter and fallen timber by burning and raking, ostensibly to combat insect infestations. These actions would have consequences for the ongoing composition of the forest flora. The effects of these practices are still noticeable today after many decades in and around the major area of early logging at the western end of Mogriguy Forest Road and near Riley's Dam. The forest here is low and scrubby with large areas of bare soil, thin understories and significant erosion along creek lines.

While the heavy harvesting of timber from the forest was curtailed with its proclamation as a State Forest in 1917, many mature trees were still removed over the years. Between 1920 and 1930 it is estimated that on average 14,500 sleepers were cut from the forest each year. By 1960 sleeper output was down by half to 7,300 per year and by 1986 to 4,500 per year. Assuming an average of 8 sleepers per tree (which is probably generous at this time) the 1986 harvest alone required the estimated felling of over 550 Ironbark trees.

Forest Managers hut at No 1 Bore (Riley's Dam) 1952 [Hindwood, Keith. Unpublished papers, SLNSW]

State Forest workers huts at No 1 Bore (Riley's Dam) 1952 [Hindwood, Keith. Unpublished papers, SLNSW]

Loggers wharf for loading sleepers

Sleeper offcuts

Log raft for drying timber

State Forest seedling tubes

No 1 Bore Dam (Rileys Dam)

State Forest fire trail

The Goonoo that Samuels inherited was a vast forested area, mostly thickly vegetated and inaccessible. There was only a maze of rough unmaintained loggers' tracks running mostly along creek lines, many based on old Aboriginal tracks between the Castlereagh and Talbragar valleys. There was no Mendooran Road, Mogriguy Forest Road, fire breaks or dams.

In 1895 a rough track running diagonally north-east from Dubbo to Mendooran was cut through the forest to give better access for sleeper-cutters to the timber in the centre of the forest. This track, which was known as the "cleared line", roughly followed the high ground between the Castlereagh valley in the west and the Talbragar in the east. It was never maintained and contained several steep inclines and difficult creek crossings. Although it was 40 kms shorter it didn't replace the existing 110km route to Mendooran via Cobbora which ran mostly through gentler open Box woodlands and farmlands on the western slopes of the Talbragar River.

In the early part of the 20thC there was considerable agitation amongst both the Dubbo and Mendooran communities to see the "cleared line" upgraded to replace the Cobbora Road with a shorter and more direct route. The cost of such an undertaking was a significant barrier to the road's construction. But also significant was that much of the land through which the road would pass was reserved for forestry use since 1902. As reserved land there was little benefit to be gained to the local economy, as adjoining land could not be developed as farming land and homesteads.

The Depression of the 1930's and the resulting unemployment provided the break that would see the road finally built. In the mid 1930's emergency relief projects were introduced in NSW, where the State government funded infrastructure programs for the unemployed. By 1940 the Mendooran Road, albeit still a dirt road, was completed along with a branch line to Mogriguy, today's Mogriguy Forest Road.

During WW2 supplies of oil and petrol in Australia were limited and the government of the day promoted the production of charcoal which could be used to produce methane gas for power and heating. Charcoal production used smaller Ironbark trees than traditional logging practices and green timber only. These were fed into large metal kilns and gradually burnt down to charcoal which could then be transported to a charcoal gas production factory.

Initially, with so many able-bodied men participating in the war effort, there was a lack of labour to carry out this program. This problem was resolved by using "enemy aliens", interned nationals from the Axis powers, to cut and process the timber. In the Dubbo region this mainly involved Italian nationals from 1943. They were billeted in temporary camps in and around the

forest as well as nearby villages and towns. Local forestry officers supervised their work. Unusually, in the Goonoo Forest area the gang of charcoal cutters included 16 volunteer Chinese Nationals, refugees from the Japanese invasion of China, brought to Australia by a Sydney based Chinese Australian merchant.

In the forest, timber for the kilns was mostly cut on the western side near the Forestry camp at No 1 Bore Dam (Now Riley's Dam) and along Mogriguy Forest Road. This was the area where both the most intensive historical logging and post-1917 State Forest tree planting programs had taken place. The Chinese volunteers lived and operated a charcoal kiln near the junction of Mogriguy Forest Road and Gates Trail, remnants of which survive today. The program undoubtedly set back the reforestation efforts in this area. By July of 1945 the need for charcoal generated gas had diminished, the "aliens" were returned to Sydney and the kilns in Goonoo and other nearby State Forests sold off, several to nearby farmers for use as grain silos. Some can be found today on the south side of nearby Old Harbour Lagoon.

Other wartime necessities almost threatened a much more significant long-term effect on the forest. In 1941 the RAAF proposed clearing a large section of the forest for an aerodrome. Thankfully this proposal was not acted upon, but it would not be the last time that the armed forces cast their eyes towards the forest.

Remains of charcoal kilns at Chinese charcoal burners' camp

WW2 charcoal kilns repurposed as grain stores at Old Harbour

As the second half of the 20th C progressed, the value of the timber in the forest continued to fall and consequently the amount of resources that the Forestry Department dedicated to its maintenance and development also diminished. It was reported in 1988 that no back burning had been carried out in the forest for at least a decade. Honey producers became a major user of the forest and by the end of the century there were about 400 hive sites in use. Graham Frost lived with his family at No 2 Bore Dam during WW2 and the family went on to use the forest for honey production for many decades and run one of NSW's largest honey production companies. He records a significant change in the public use of the forest from the 1960's as living standards in the local area increased, particularly in relation to the general availability of motor vehicles and motorbikes.

> *"And then things changed about the 1960's. A lot of the young people in the towns acquired vehicles of their own. And they used to go out through the forest and go here and go there for amusement of the weekends. And amongst those young people, not all of them, most of them were very, very honest. But there was an element crept in amongst it. And they become light fingered, a ... certain amount of the youth, and you couldn't leave your things there"*

This increase in the accessibility of the forest and its decline as an economic resource led to significant changes in the use of the forest by sections of the local community including illegal firewood collection, rubbish and car dumping and motorbike trail riding. Aside from the damage that these activities caused to the natural environment of the forest, they fuelled public perception of the forest amongst the general community as an uninviting and potentially dangerous wasteland. This is an attitude that to a certain degree persists today and continues to affect local people's use of the forest for non-destructive purposes.

Illegal firewood logging

Dump of builder's materials

Trail bike path in forest

Poison grain dump

Trees for Beauty and Utility

The change in attitude in the early 20th C towards the preservation of natural resources for future generations went beyond simply managing timber resources. Other voices in the community were starting to be heard, calling out other benefits of native wildlife and habitats. One of the earliest such groups in the Dubbo region was the Gould League of Bird Lovers. The League began in Victoria in 1909, and the first NSW branch was formed the following year in nearby Wellington by local teacher Walter Finigan and headmaster Edward Webster. The League was dedicated to bird and habitat protection and environmental education, particularly of primary school children. It was formed because of a growing understanding of the value and importance of native birds in controlling agricultural pests. Until this time there was a general mistrust of the natural Australian bush and its inhabitants, and young boys were actively encouraged to kill birds and to collect their eggs and nests in large numbers. There was also a thriving industry based on using bird feathers for fashion. The activities of the League were integrated into local primary school curriculums throughout the 20th C and were a major force in changing local perceptions and attitudes towards natural environments.

Undoubtedly one of the local children inspired and encouraged by the League in Wellington was George W. Althofer who would go on to be a major influence in promoting the natural values of the area including the Goonoo Forest. He became a prolific writer of books and articles on the natural features of the Wellington area. He was a champion for the preservation of Australian flora with his involvement in the Australian Native Plants Society and was responsible for the establishment of the renowned Burrendong Botanic Garden & Arboretum near Mudgee in 1964.

One of the earliest signs of the development of a modern conservation attitude towards the forest, one based on an appreciation of its beauty and non-extractive value, appears in 1921 in the following anonymous extract from the *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*.

> *" DUBBO'S NATURAL FLORAL WEALTH*
>
> *An Unknown, Unexplored Natural Park and Picnic Grounds.*
>
> *Unknown to many, Dubbo possesses one of the most beautiful floral parks within easy distance. Situated on the Dubbo-Merrygoen railway extension, between Boomley and Mendooran, about 40 miles from Dubbo, there is a tract of country generally described as barren, because it is a belt of ironbark timber.*

To the lover of Australian flora, it is a perfect treasure house. Australian flowers, shrubs and trees abound - native heather, pink and mauve boronia, satin flowers, the edelweiss or flannel flower, no less than 30 different types of the acacias or wattles, silver bells, wild clematis, vie with the wild sarsaparilla or wild tea vine, everlastings (both white and yellow), monkey flower, snow plant, dozens of different kinds of daisies, giveet grass trees, with their wonderful spear-like flowers, white and yellow, quandongs, with their golden and red pendulant fruit: wild myrtles making the air redolent with their perfume; yarrans, with their yellow blossoms and scented wood; giant hickories, loaded with blossom, vie with the red-leafed gum for beauty of place. Thousands of other plants and flowers abound.

Bird life lends an added charm to its forest dells. Wild pigeon, wongas and bronzewing, mingle their "coo" with the native dove. The ironbark tree, laden with blossoms, swarm with parakeets that make the air ring with their revels as they feed on the honey-laden flowers. Parrots abound; the blue bonnet, budgerigars and bellewing are seen with the rosella. Here is a giant ironbark that has for its tenants a pair of wedge-tailed eagles, whose nest looks like an immense pile of sticks. "Ha! ha! ha!" the laughing jackass bids you welcome, while the leatherhead or bald-headed friar bays "You're a liar," or else "You'll catch no fish." Happy families noisily object to your trespass, and the dog bird cries, "Yahoo! yahoo!"

Thousands of love birds and diamond sparrows make this forest their home. These are only a few of the treasure's lovers of Australian flora and bird life can find in this forest reservation, which equals in the spring months anything to be seen either on the Blue Mountains, or else on the North Coast.

The hand of the vandal must not be allowed lo desecrate and destroy this wonderful natural park. It belongs to Dubbo, and under proper control will help to make the line of railway pay. Starting in September, excursion trains should be run there.

The Dubbo Progress Association should take this matter in hand, and secure this for the people. With a caretaker and a dancing and refreshment pavilion, this place will be one of the beauty spots of Dubbo, and pay, too. Recently I travelled through it with another gentleman. Both of us have seen most of the flower-decked forest and canyons of the world, but they fade to nothing compared as to what was to be seen in this part of the railway extension from Dubbo to Mendooran during the month of October. And it remains for Dubbo residents to see that full publicity is given to its beauties and charms. Strange,

too, on this line is the wonderful zetz-spa water springs. Nothing marks the station to show the existence of such, nor can you buy the waters on the station as one goes through. "

The anonymous nature of this article is significant at this time as it doesn't reflect the general attitude amongst the community about the beauty and utility of native plants and wildlife. I believe it is most likely that the author was the aforementioned George W. Althofer. As the young son of a prominent and established Wellington farmer it was probably prudent at the time to hide his identity as an author from the local community.

Significant support for the work of the Gould League came from the 1930's from a new organisation in the area, the Buninyong Agricultural Bureau. The idea of a formal organisation made up of local farmers that would cooperate in financial management, crop protection, technical advice and networking generally was first realised in South Australia in 1888. The Buninyong-Eulomogo Agricultural Bureau was formed in the Dubbo area in 1924 and from the 1930's was particularly vocal in the need to conserve local bird populations for the management of agricultural pests, principally by the implementation of Bird and Wildlife Refuges or Reserves.

Unfortunately, the members of the Agricultural Bureau were not unanimous in their desire to see bird sanctuaries in the area, at least outside smaller portions of town parks and individual properties. In June 1940 the Bureau moved a motion to request that the Fisheries and Game Department proclaim the Goonoo State Forest a sanctuary for native animals and birds. Fisheries and Game responded that it was not usual for State Forests to be so proclaimed, that they were carrying out another campaign to check the decline of bird populations in the state and the matter of proclaiming State forests as sanctuaries was "receiving the consideration of the Forestry Commission". Furthermore, a member of the Bureau moved that the motion be rescinded, and in his objections stated that the unfenced forest was a menace to landholders from invading kangaroos which ate and damaged crops, a complaint still common today despite subsequent fencing being installed.

Nevertheless, the Bureau continued advocating for the development of bird and wildlife sanctuaries, expanding their calls for governments to organise an expanded and comprehensive network of reserves to cover the state, laying the groundwork for today's National Park and Reserve system. From the 1950's several sanctuaries or reserves in the area were declared, probably the best known being the Wildlife Reserve at Old Harbour Lagoon to the west of the forest, parts of which were first proclaimed in 1960. Parts of the forest known today as Coolbaggie Nature Reserve – East Section were first designated a Faunal Reserve in 1963.

Another driver for this expanding perception of the value of the forest was the rise of scientific research into its natural features of which the earliest example is the work of Thomas P Austin. He was the owner of the Cobbora station in the Talbragar valley to the east of the Goonoo Forest in the early 20thC. He was recognised as one of Australia's foremost bird egg and nest collectors, his collection being eventually donated to the Australian Museum in Sydney in the 1930's in response to new legislation in NSW banning the practice of egg collection as a major cause of native bird declines. He was also the nephew of a namesake from western Victoria who has the dubious distinction of being the man who introduced feral rabbits to Australia. Thomas P Austin published the first survey of the wildlife of Goonoo Forest, with the publication of "The birds of the Cobbora district" in 1918 in the journal *The Australian Zoologist*.

Research and interest in the biodiversity and natural values of the forest accelerated after WW2. In 1947 George W. Althofer hosted a visit to the forest by Miss Thistle Y. Harris, one of Australia's best-known botanists, co-author of the seminal 1938 publication *Wild flowers of Australia* and responsible for writing the first books on cultivating native Australian plants. They took photographs of native flowers and shrubs in the forest for inclusion in Miss Harris' new book *Australian Plants for the Garden*.

The Forestry Commission also started to diversify its attitude to the use of the forest with a series of articles in 1954 specifically highlighting the Goonoo State Forest and other State Forests in the Dubbo area in the national publication *The Land* under the title "Trees for beauty and utility". Although written under the byline "Blue Gum" there is enough content provided by George W. Althofer to suspect his significant involvement if not full authorship. One of the articles includes the following poem;

> *"Come to Dubbo in the springtime*
> *See its flowers in unknown by-ways*
> *See its national arboretum!*
> *Know the glory of its forests in their garb of timeless beauty*

Learn the battle of its bird lovers to protect the feathered peoples
Talk with men about their homelands and the conquest of the drought times! "

From the early 1950's and through the 1960's prominent ornithologists such as Keith Hindwood and Michael Sharland visited Goonoo and recorded the birdlife they encountered, with a particular interest in the Malleefowl, the forest being the only location where this bird builds its mounds in tall forests. These early bird surveys were expanded on and summarised in a 1973 paper by an amateur but respected birdwatcher, Rev Heron. He confirmed the presence of Glossy Black Cockatoos in the forest and that populations of many birds followed a boom-and-bust cycle based on the amount of annual rainfall in the area.

In 1998 the first comprehensive research into the vertebrate fauna of the forest was published by Darren Shelly from the Department of Land and Water Conservation. He confirmed the importance of mature trees with nesting hollows for a variety of vertebrate species and identified the forest as containing a significant number of different bat species. This work laid the foundation for the late early 21st C comprehensive survey of the biodiversity of the forest in the Brigalow Belt report.

By the late 1990's there was a growing realisation that there was a need to develop a better method of managing Australia's natural resources for long term sustainability, and that a biogeographic and bioregional approach was one way of doing this. The Goonoo Forest was identified as being the southern section of what is called the Brigalow Belt, a tract of semi-arid forest, woodland and grassland stretching north from Goonoo along the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range into central Queensland. As part of this strategy a comprehensive survey of the biodiversity, Indigenous and non-Indigenous history of the Goonoo Forest was carried out and several detailed reports published in the early 2000's. This survey identified that the Brigalow Belt was one of the most disturbed and degraded natural environments in NSW, identifying many threatened habitats, flora and fauna species. This information provided the background for growing calls for many areas, including the Goonoo Forest, to have stricter protection from development activities.

Cut made into felled tree by researcher/collectors/poacher to access bird eggs or chicks. Probably mid-20th C.

Inspecting a malleefowl nest in 1952. [Keith Hindwood unpublished papers. State Library of NSW.]

As part of the Brigalow Belt report, oral histories were collected from descendants of the Munga people, whose families had visited and hunted in Goonoo for many years. The following comments were made about the changes they had seen in the forest in the second half of the 20thC:

> *"But the birds for a start, there are no animals, no birds. That's one of the main things I remember is sitting down and the birds being everywhere and y'know you are practically hand feeding them. No birds, no animals, rabbits, y'know, like you'd see little rabbits running around you, foxes, goannas or lizards, you are even lucky to see a lizard y'know?*
>
> *That's the big change I've seen. And you wonder why aye, where they've all gone. And that is one of the main things that my fathers noticed too. … Even like the trees, the age that this forest is, look how small the trees are, there is not a decent size tree in it is there? I'd say the majority of the scar trees have been cut down. That's one thing my father said the other night he said" Why don't they leave the forest as it is and let the young trees come up and mature a bit. They have just about drained it out""*
>
> *"Now getting back to Goonoo Forest … that forest used to come right through [to the Talbragar River] … and white European came here, he knocked all that Mallee timber down and all that scrub down.*
>
> *My grandmother used to tell me that was a beautiful scrub, come right down to the Talbragar, right across all them plains there. And you can actually see where white man have knocked it back and fenced it, back into certain areas. See where they've stopped it y'know? Yeah. Well, they've just pushed it back and kept pushing it back. And the last thing that I'd wanna see is to see it wiped out y'know and because it is very, very sacred to us, very dear, …She used to say "All that country was all for them animals [that] used to live there. You see all that big hills, them plains? They all used to live in there, that's all that mallee timber was all there. All different sorts of timber, right through to the Goonoo Forest, used to come right down ere. So now look at that""*

In the 21st C there have been significant opportunities for people in the community to share their observations with others. An increasing number of photos and records have found their way into online recording programs such as eBird and iNaturalist, further increasing knowledge about the forest and promoting the value of conservation to the broader community.

While the economic value of the forest was starting to decline and more information about its natural values were being identified, local community groups began to form to promote its

recreational use and protection. The first of these, the Dubbo Field Naturalists and Conservation Society (DFNCS) was formed in 1977. The first president was the local Liberal member for Dubbo, John Mason, a former State Minister for Lands and Forestry. At its inaugural meeting the aims of the society were stated to "promote an interest in the natural sciences and to increase people's knowledge of the world around them". Since then, it has provided regular field trips and public talks covering a wide range of natural history subjects, both local, national and international, including the Goonoo Forest. It was the first of a growing number of local community-based organisations that were directly associated with the modern conservation movement that developed in the late 20th C. The Society has made submissions and joined actions on a variety of contemporary conservation issues affecting the forest.

One of the earliest issues affecting the forest came in 1983 when the Army announced that an area of 200,000 ha including the Goonoo State Forest was under consideration to be developed as a military school complex including an artillery and manoeuvre training range. This would have seen the complete destruction of the forest as a natural habitat. Fortunately, submissions from the DFNCS and other local groups including adjoining landholders and affected Councils led to this proposal being rejected. In 1986 the Goonoo State Forest was added to the National Estate Register as an area of national significance.

As the 1980's and 90's progressed, the concerns and proposals of the conservation movement continued to gain acceptance and influence throughout Australia. The status and condition of many natural environments in regional areas, including the Goonoo Forest, began to gain prominence as issues of national importance. Key to this process was the work of local organisations such as the DFNCS in highlighting and promoting the natural values of the forest for preservation. An early focus was the malleefowl population of the forest. The DFNCS played a vital role in locating and monitoring active mounds, particularly through the investigations of DFNCS President, Terry Korn.

One of many individuals that worked tirelessly in this area was Judie Peet. She first visited the forest in the late 1990's and devoted considerable time documenting the habits of the forest's plants and animals, particularly the Glossy Black Cockatoo. She instigated a regular annual program of monitoring and observation so that the behavioural patterns and seasonal variations of this threatened species could be better understood. The monitoring program was maintained by the DFNCS until the late 2010's and continues today under NPWS coordination. Judie was honoured to have a dam in the northern part of the forest named after her but unfortunately passed away a few years before the forest came under protection.

In the 21st C more community-based groups and government organisations began to play a role in the conservation of natural habitats in the area, some with a general focus on the wider area and others with more specific aims. In 2012 the Dubbo Men's Shed, in cooperation with NPWS installed 100 nesting boxes for Glossy Black Cockatoos and other hollow nesting animals in the forest. In 2015 the Gas Field Free Dubbo group campaigned for the restriction of gas exploration and harvesting in the forest. Nevertheless, as late as 2025 promoters of resource extraction in the local community were still agitating for the resumption of logging in the forest.

DFNCS and State Forestry workers monitoring malleefowl nest under threat from a forest fire 1994. [DFNCS Archives]

DFNCS field trip to Goonoo Forest. 2004. [DFNCS Archives]

National Park Status

The status of the State Forest had been declining for some time as the demand for hardwoods had continued to fall and calls for protection from logging and mining continued to grow. Although the economic value of the current use of the forest was not a major part of the local economy, significant sections of the local community still opposed its conversion to protected status, and it became a significant political issue in the NSW State election of 2003. Proposals to harvest the forest's timber for charcoal production and other resources were routinely highlighted in the local press. The Labor government of Bob Carr made the conversion of the Goonoo State Forest to the Goonoo National Park (9066 ha) and Goonoo State Conservation Area (54,522 ha) part of their platform for the election, and this was completed on 1 December 2005.

NPWS has carried out actions to preserve the biodiversity of the forest with specific attention to populations of threatened species such as the malleefowl. This principally involves the management of fire regimes and control of feral animals such as foxes, cats, goats and pigs. Minor development of recreational facilities has been implemented in 2025 in the National Park area of the forest at Riley's Dam.

Fire has long been a part of the Australian landscape and sclerophyllous plants and plant communities such as the Ironbark forests of Goonoo have adapted to its effects over millions of years. It is well documented that many Aboriginal groups across Australia have long used fire to maintain a landscape that maximised the plant and animal life needed for food, medicine and other uses. In the forest this involved setting and controlling small fires near creek lines and waterholes to promote the growth of certain plants and attract animals and birds near occupation sites. There is little evidence that the Munga people systematically burnt the vast heavily wooded areas of the forest away from these areas.

Early non-Indigenous settlers in the area used fire to clear timber and scrub from farmland. It seems likely that some fires escaped into the forest proper, but most large fires affecting the wooded areas of the forest since colonisation are reported to have been started by lightning strikes. Unfortunately, arson in the forest continues into recent times.

There is no evidence that fire was used to manage the forest by the early sleeper cutters or during the Forestry Reserve phase from 1902 to 1917. Under State Forest management from 1917 to 2005 a variety of methods were introduced as a priority to control the spread of large fires. Some level of back burning was carried out primarily to restrict the growth of "weed"

species in favour of commercial timbers. This may have only been done on a small scale: a 1998 survey reported that State Forests had not carried out any such burning in the forest for at least a decade.

Under National Parks management a more rigorous, regular and scientifically based regime of controlled burns has been introduced to:

- maintain a mosaic of natural habitats to maximise biodiversity
- promote and maintain specific habitats required for specific threatened species (e.g. malleefowl)
- reduce the risk of forest fires spreading to neighbouring properties.

Although there has been a lot of research in Australia on the effect of different fire regimes on natural environments, their ecological dynamics are complex and specific for different plants, animals, communities and habitats, both at the micro and macro level. Recovery from a fire is dependent upon a wide range of factors. With a “cool” fire most Ironbarks will produce suckers within a few weeks. The forest canopy is restored within a relatively short period of time, rapidly building up the ground leaf litter layer and preventing the growth of other trees such as native pines (Callitris spp.) and she-oaks (Allocasuarina spp.). A “cool” fire may aid in the formation of tree hollows for arboreal animals, and the fall of damaged limbs restores the amount of timber on the forest floor for fungi and other animals.

Larger “hot” fires can bring about catastrophic changes to the biodiversity and nature of the forest. Hot fires will kill Ironbarks and subsequent erosion of the topsoil removes the seed bank and reduces soil fertility leading to the development of thick forests of native pine and she-oaks and shrubby dense thickets of acacias. Restoration of the slow growing Ironbark forest canopy can take several decades if not centuries. The largest recent catastrophic fire to affect the forest was over a three-week period in January 2007 when about 27,000 ha (40% of the total forest) was burnt, cutting a broad 20km east-west band across the centre of the forest. This event is believed to have significantly reduced the number of nesting hollows and food sources for many animals including the threatened Glossy Black Cockatoo, and to have led to a reduction in malleefowl breeding in the forest.

Photo by Vision Communicators - Dubbo

Below: 700ha area burnt at 0900hrs

Below: 3,300ha area burnt at 1600hrs

Aerial view of 2007 fire. [Bushfire Bulletin Vol. 29 No 1.]

22/01/07 1900hrs
26,500ha

22/01 1900

Frost Fire

Extent of 2007 fire. [Bushfire Bulletin Vol. 29 No 1.]

Aftermath of “hot” fire 2026

Regeneration from fire with some Ironbark regrowth and dense Acacia triplex undergrowth

Fires do not have to be large to have significant effects on the forest, particularly for smaller habitats that are uncommon in the forest, such as Mallee. Whilst the forest is large enough that common plant communities such as Ironbarks can distribute seed to the burnt areas, this is less likely with restricted communities which are often dependent upon specific conditions. A good example of this is the 2023 arson of a small area of Gilgai near the junction of Frost and Gates Trails. Gilgai is a particular soil formation where a higher level of clay in the soil allows water to pool for longer periods than in sandy areas. It is therefore of great importance to wildlife in the area. In addition, it was one of the areas regularly inhabited and managed as fertile chains of ponds by Indigenous people before colonisation. The 2023 fire destroyed several scar trees in the Gilgai area and increased sedimentation in its ponds. The understory in this area has been slow to regenerate.

One of the major management priorities for NPWS in the forest is the control of invasive species. Goonoo is fortunate in that it does not have a significant problem with plant weeds as the forest does not have a significant history of domestic livestock which are vectors for the spread of introduced weeds. In addition, all the creeks in the forest are contained within the reserved areas and weedy seeds are not washed into it from surrounding farms. The most noticeable plant weed in the forest are prickly pears, introduced by sleeper-cutters.

The original predator species in the forest were thylacines. Around about 5000 years ago they were replaced with the arrival of dingoes in the area. It is not known what relationship the Indigenous people had with dingo populations, but they were mercilessly hunted from the beginning of colonial farming in the 1830's. The earliest settlers also brought domesticated dogs and cats which competed with the dingo. There are still occasional reports of dingoes or "wild dogs" in the Dubbo area, and it is likely that "wild dogs" regularly visit or persist in the forest. Foxes arrived in the area in the late 19th C following the spread of feral rabbit populations. Despite the control of rabbit populations in the 20th C, foxes are still, along with cats, a major predator of native birds, mammals and reptiles. Canine and feline tracks are very commonly seen on fire trails. NPWS regularly maintain predator baiting programs throughout the park.

Rabbits were a major problem in surrounding areas from the 1920's but do not seem to have ever penetrated far into the forest. The myxomatosis and calicivirus vaccines reduced numbers in the second half of the 20th C but there are signs of them returning to the forest. Their major effect is to reduce regeneration of native grasses and shrubs near water. Deer are also known to have increased their distribution throughout western NSW in the 21st C and were recorded in the forest along the southern edges in 2024.

Pigs and goats are well established in the forest. They both affect the growth and regeneration of native grasses and shrubs. Pigs are also a significant problem because of their omnivorous diet, disruption of leaf litter layers and fouling of water points. Numbers of both pigs and goats increase markedly during wet periods and NPWS carry out regular trapping and control programs. Their movement out of the forest into adjoining farmland is a constant source of conflict between many surrounding landowners and the NPWS.

Honeybee farming became common in the forest after WW2. There were about 400 registered hive sites in the forest in 2022. Naturalised nests have been found in the forest in recent years. Introduced honeybees are believed to compete with native bees, birds and other insect pollinators.

Native animals and plants can also cause significant changes to natural habitats. Kangaroos and emus have increased their numbers in the forest since the construction of dams and fire trails during the State Forest years. There is evidence that other native bird species such as Red Wattlebirds, Pied Currawongs and Noisy Miners have become more common in the forest by expansion from surrounding agricultural lands and increased nearby urbanisation. They actively compete with other native bird species in the forest for food, water and nesting sites. As the effects of climate change continue it is expected that the flora and fauna of the forest will continue to change.

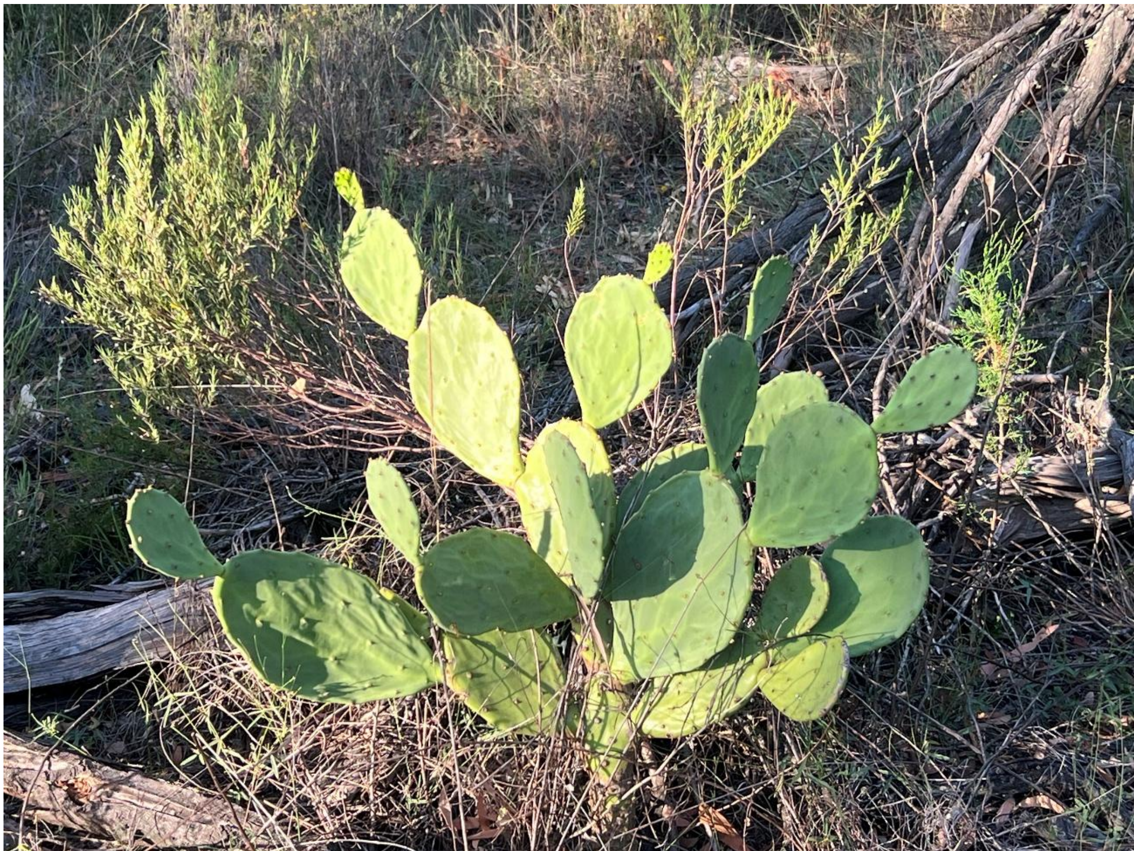
Goats on fire trail

Fox on farming land adjacent to forest

Pigs at waterhole

Damage caused by pigs in the forest and at waterholes

Feral bee hive



Prickly Pear

The Future

Climate Change: It is scientifically accepted that the earth is currently experiencing a period of rapid climate change, and the forest will be subject to hotter, drier weather conditions and more extreme weather events in the future. These changes will affect the ecology of the forest and the numbers and types of organisms that live in it in the long term. Under these conditions it is expected that plants and animals now more suited to more western drier areas would become more common. However, this will depend upon the ability of such biota to find suitable migratory and dispersal pathways to the forest, a process made more difficult by the ongoing isolation of the forest from surrounding refuges. A drier, hotter climate with more extreme weather events is likely to see an increase in the frequency of hot fires which will lead to a gradual replacement of the predominant Ironbark forest with a biota better suited to such conditions.

Isolation: The ongoing fragmentation and isolation of the Ironbark forests in the area presents one of the greatest threats to the plants and animals of Goonoo Forest. Before the arrival of colonists in the 1830's the forest was part of an almost continuous band of medium density tall forest that stretched along the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range from inland of Mackay in Queensland to western Victoria, a distance of over 2500 kms. Today over 90% has been cleared and thinned, replaced by agricultural land dominated by grasslands. In NSW the only significant forests of this original type that remain are the Goonoo and the Pilliga forests to the north, supplemented by several other very small and scattered reserves in the vicinity. Clearing of the remaining forested areas in private ownership and logging of existing State Forests in the area continues today, increasing the fragmentation and isolation of remnants of this habitat.

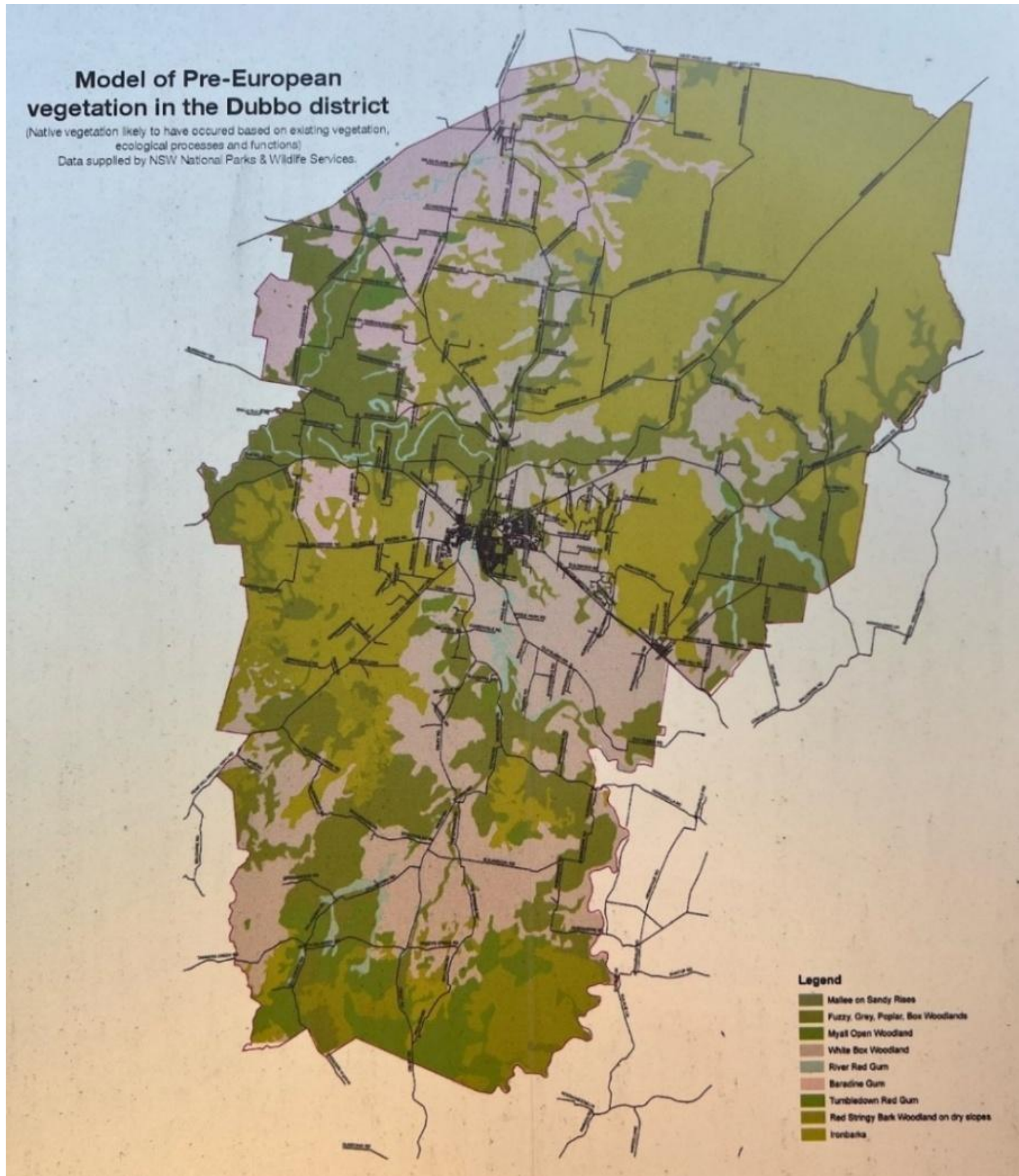
It is well documented that smaller remnants contain less variety of species and are more vulnerable to habitat degradation and local extinctions over time. Their usefulness in maintaining viable populations of organisms and acting as corridors or refuges for the movement of animal populations and dispersal of plant species is limited. Although the Goonoo Forest is large, this ongoing clearing and the inability of smaller less mobile animals or those that have specific habitat requirements to move between remnant patches of forest will lead to genetic bottlenecks and local extinctions. This process may also explain the apparent inability of historically known species such as koalas, possums and malleefowl to repopulate the forest since it achieved a level of conservation status. The predicted rate and effects of climate change will only exacerbate this trend.

Although clearing of forested areas and remnant trees around the forest continues today, there are some positive signs. More farmers in the area are successfully experimenting with low impact, wildlife friendly techniques for managing the land and government bodies have introduced a number of programs to support this process. At least one landowner adjoining the forest has taken up a Biodiversity Stewardship Agreement with the NSW Department of Environment and Heritage, and the Central West Local Land Service announced in 2026 a “Safe haven for native species” program to install nest boxes and wildlife drinkers in forested areas adjoining the forest.

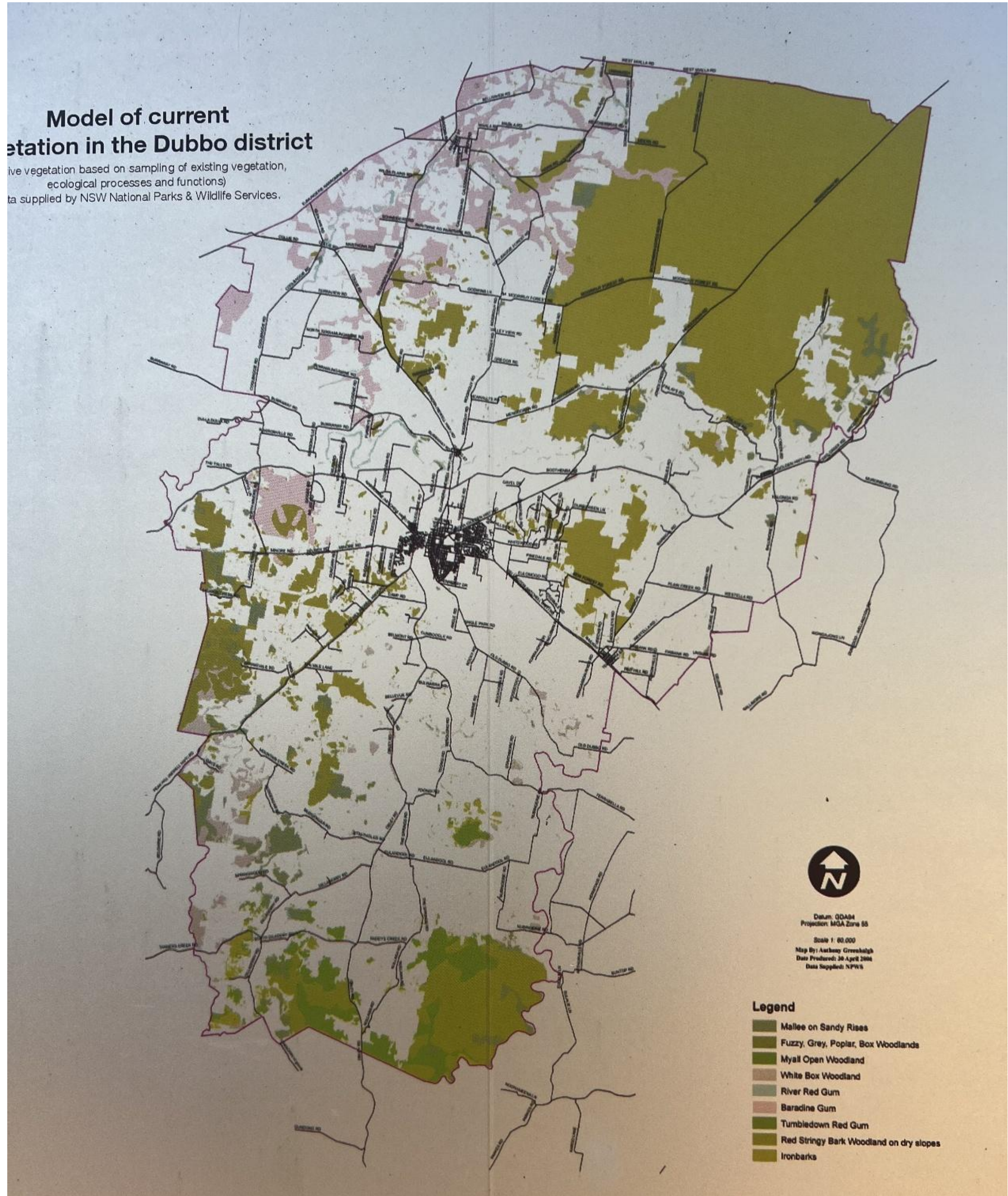
Recreational use: I was very surprised when I first went to Dubbo in 2020 that many residents I met had never visited the forest and some could not even identify its location. I was told that it was unsafe to visit because it was a place where groups of young men went to drink, party and ride trail bikes, full of dumped rubbish and stolen burnt out cars. It is true that the forest has been and continues to be used in this way by sections of the community but much less so than in the past. Those that were open to visiting the forest also expressed a reluctance to do so due to lack of facilities and visitors information. Goonoo lacks the obvious highlights of other nearby parks such as the Warrumbungles, Mt Kaputar or Coolah Tops. It has no picturesque rivers, panoramic views, impressive geological formations, substantial historical sites or marked hiking trails. Nevertheless, there is scope for recreational activities to be developed in the forest.

In 2025 the NPWS carried out some improvements including a formal fire pit and car barriers at the most obvious focus point in the National Park section of the forest at Riley’s Dam. These improvements could be further enhanced with the provision of toilets and defined camping bays at this site. This recent development complemented the other major recreational development in the forest in the last decade, the Central West Cyle Trail between Mudgee, Mendooran, Dubbo and Wellington, now marked with formal signage within the forest. There are also opportunities for formal hiking, walking and other bike trails to be created in the area using existing old logging and trail bike paths that take in a range of different plant communities including references to both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous history of the forest. The old logging trail cutting the corner of Mogriguy Forest Rd and Gates Trail including the WW2 Chinese charcoal cutters camp and several Indigenous scarred trees is one example of where this might be done. Similar loop trails near Riley’s Dam are equally plausible. Development of facilities in the Conservation Area part of the forest outside the National Park is difficult given its current short term conservation status but there are potential picnic and hiking sites at Paddy’s Dam, No. 2 Bore Dam, Farmers Dam in the north and along Spring Creek and Goan Creek in the southeast. I would argue that these types of investment would encourage more responsible

users and their increased use of the park will also act as a strong disincentive to those who might want to use it for destructive purposes.



Map of pre-European vegetation in the Dubbo region. [NPWS, Dubbo Regional Botanic Garden]



Map of current vegetation in the Dubbo region. .c 2000 [NPWS, Dubbo Regional Botanic Garden]

Conservation Status & Mining: It is a common misconception in the local community that the entire area of Goonoo State Forest proclaimed as conservation reserves in 2005 are permanently protected from future development. State Conservation Areas constitute 84% of the current forest. But these are areas where mineral values and existing mining leases preclude permanent preservation and they must undergo review every 5 years. The Goonoo State Conservation Area has been reviewed 4 times since 2005 and continues to be assessed as not eligible for stricter preservation with National Park status.

In 2008 companies gained license to conduct gold explorations in this area. In 2021 a company called Alice Queen Ltd announced that it had approval for exploration drilling in the forest and by 2023 it had identified eight high priority, large scale copper-gold targets in the (as they misnamed it) Goonoo Goonoo SCA. The company received a $200,000 grant from the NSW Government under the New Frontiers Co-operative Drilling initiative to proceed. The status of this license is unknown.

Coal deposits had been identified along the eastern edges of the forest as far back as the 1880's and mined for a decade or so at Ballimore. There are existing titles for coal and petroleum exploration covering the forest today held by Santos. Exploratory drilling is believed to have been carried out in the forest in 2024/25 principally for coal seam gas deposits.

Although in the current climate it appears unlikely that these mining licenses will be activated in the short term, they remain a significant future threat to the forest and one that local community groups, Councils, State Government bodies and individuals should be prioritising for planning and action towards long term protection from development.

Last words: At the beginning of this paper I posed the question, Why is this forest still here? In the end I find I must go back to the very beginning, the formation of the forest, to answer this question. The dry sandy infertile soils laid down millions of years ago have effectively thwarted all human attempts over the years to conquer its dark, rough barked and dense Ironbark forests. The sleeper-cutting industry and the ferocious fires of the late 19th and 20th century have left their scars, but it remains today remarkably intact, wild and mostly impenetrable, stoic in facing the challenges of the past and coming years.

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