



Four Corners
c/- Australian Broadcasting Corporation
GPO Box 9994
Sydney NSW 2001
Email: 4corners@abc.net.au

cc. Senator Jonathon Duniham
Assistant Minister for Forestry, Fisheries and Regional Tourism
Email: assistantminister.duniham@agriculture.gov.au

2 August 2019

RE: **Complaint to the ABC re Four Corners 24 June 2019: 'Extinction Nation'**

To whom it may concern

As the peak professional body representing the nation's forest scientists, the Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) would like to submit a complaint about some of the forestry segment of the Four Corners program *Extinction Nation* that aired on 24 June 2019.

We believe that the *Extinction Nation* episode represented bias on forest issues and neglected in its obligations of its charter to provide balance, in particular the failure of the program to report on all the available science on these matters, including the work of forest scientists. We believe that the approach to this episode seriously misrepresented the science and the reality of species extinction due to a lack of context, basic understanding, and influence of environmental extremists, which resulted in poor journalistic outcomes.

It is well documented, but not reflected in the program that forestry has never been responsible for any fauna or flora extinction in this country. Accordingly, a Four Corners program devoting almost half of its on-air time to forestry whilst ostensibly examining the threat of extinction faced by Australian wildlife, displays a serious lack of perspective on what the real threats to our wildlife are.

The major threats to Australia's forest-dwelling wildlife are introduced pest animals and plants, unnatural fire regimes, and permanent habitat loss for agricultural or urban development. While these threats were mentioned in passing by at least one ecologist interviewee, Four Corners did not take the opportunity to interview experts in areas such as pest animal eradication or fire management thereby severely diminishing the program's credibility in this subject area.

Furthermore, nowhere in the program's discussion of the supposed threat of forestry to two species – Leadbeater's Possum and Swift Parrot – was there any mention of the respective proportions of their forested habitats that are used for forestry versus already reserved for biodiversity conservation. This



omission grossly exaggerated the real threat posed by timber harvesting and regenerating forests, given that it is already excluded from most forests.

By portraying forestry in a negative context, Four Corners also lost the opportunity to report on measures that are allowing biodiversity conservation to successfully co-exist with the equally important requirement to sustainably produce greenhouse-friendly wood products. At present, Australia cannot meet its own wood products requirements and relies heavily on imports, often from unsustainable sources, as our own production of timber decreases largely through, at times, questionable conservation decisions. These decisions are also encouraging greater reliance on non-renewable wood substitutes like concrete, steel, plastic or aluminium which embody far greater greenhouse gas emissions in their production and manufacture. Accordingly, there are serious unintended environmental consequences attached to the notion that we should no longer be producing our own hardwood timber products on supposed pro-conservation grounds.

We have provided additional information for the benefit of your journalists and also to support our complaint below.

I look forward to your reply to our concerns.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robert Gordon', is written over a light grey circular graphic element that is part of the background design.

Robert Gordon

President, IFA

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the professional body representing over 1200 members who are forest scientists, professionals and/or managers operating in all aspects of forest and natural resource management, including forest conservation, throughout Australia.

Foresters, informed by the science of natural resource management, play a crucial role in shaping the future of forests. We advocate balanced land use that meets society's needs for sustainable forest management, timber supply, and conservation outcomes.



Complaint to the ABC re Four Corners 24 June 2019: 'Extinction Nation' Supporting Documentation on Specific Areas of Concern

1. Bias manufactured by selective treatment of information provided to the program

There are many examples in the *Extinction Nation* program where the ABC through its background fact-checking and/or research interviews was provided with highly relevant information which was either ignored or downplayed in the screened final program.

2. Non-disclosure of critically important context

The proportion of forest that is actually used for timber production is fundamental to any examination of the environmental impact attributable to forestry activities. Professional forester and IFA Fellow, Mark Poynter, had stressed the importance of this context in two separate phone discussions with ABC researchers in the weeks prior to his interview by Four Corners.

It was also a major point of discussion in the program's subsequent interview of Mr Poynter on May 16th, during which he pointed out that much of the ecological research into Leadbeater's Possum (LBP) has repeated a wildly erroneous claim that 80% of the mountain ash forest type preferred by LBP are available for timber harvesting, even though the real figure is around 30% (with the other 70% already reserved for biodiversity conservation).

Following his interview, Poynter sent extracts from the Central Highlands Forest Management Plan (1998) to the Four Corners' reporter, Stephanie March, and producer, Janine Cohen, to demonstrate that the '80% available for logging' claim is not true. Ms March apparently acknowledged receipt of this information by email.

Poynter's interview did not make it into the final program and accordingly no mention was made during the program that most of the forest favoured by Leadbeater's Possum was not actually used for timber production. This omission was critically important because it allowed adverse opinions about timber production's supposedly dire impact on the possum's survival, expressed by conservation biologists, Lindenmayer, Wintle, and Woinarski, to be unfairly legitimised.

The program's non-disclosure of how much forest is already reserved from timber harvesting also enabled other misconceptions to be legitimised. For example, the claim made whilst filming in a logged coupe that these public forests are not protecting all values for everyone, without disclosing that, as most forests are not used for timber production, the landscape as a whole does indeed supply all the values expected from public forests.

3. Non-disclosure of visual context

The program featured a night-time Leadbeater's possum survey undertaken in what appeared to be young regrowth forest. However, no mention was made on whether this regrowth was post-timber harvesting. This is important because if the area where the detections were made has a history of timber harvesting or is timber harvesting regrowth, then much of the basis of the Four Corners narrative on the supposedly dire impact of forestry would fall apart.

4. Inclusion of false or dubious assertions due to apparent double standards in fact-checking



We are aware from our members employed in Victorian and Tasmanian Government forestry agencies that Four Corners' researchers undertook extensive fact-checking of statements made by both Ross Hampton and Mark Poynter in their Four Corners interviews, so as to ensure that false assertions were excluded from the final program. Indeed, prior to his interview, IFA Fellow Mark Poynter spent approximately 1.5 hours on separate phone conversations with two different ABC researchers (Lisa McGregor and Naomi) fact-checking a scientific paper he had co-authored last year.

However, it seems that the same standard of fact-checking was not undertaken in relation to statements made by the interviewed conservation biologists (Professors David Lindenmayer, Brendan Wintle and John Woinarski), or the interviewed forest activist, Steven Meacher, given that many false or dubious assertions which they made were aired on the program.

The following is a list of examples of such false or dubious assertions made on the program:

- *"There has been very little reduction in the pressure on the forest in fact it is significantly greater than it has ever been."* (Professor Lindenmayer).

This statement is completely false and the ABC's program researchers had obtained information from VicForests showing it to be false, yet it was allowed to be aired on the program. In fact, there has been a substantial reduction in the level of timber harvesting in these forests over the past decade in response to the effects of the 2009 bushfires as well as the application of hundreds of additional buffers for conserving Leadbeater's Possum since 2014. This has resulted in one sawmill closure as well as a major 40% reduction in the sawlog volume annually supplied to the nation's largest remaining hardwood sawmill in Heyfield.

- *"Another fire and continued logging would basically nail the rest of the populations"* (Professor Lindenmayer).

This statement is false. While fires are certainly the major threat to wildlife populations, the presence of a timber industry operating in a minor portion of the forest plays a major role in reducing the wider fire threat through maintaining the access road network and providing expertise, equipment, and manpower that makes a substantial contribution to fire-fighting. This was also pointed out to the program's researchers but entirely ignored.

Indeed, the program's accompanying imagery taken near Cambarville of 1939 regrowth forest burnt by the 2009 fires, which was intended to convey destroyed habitat, is in-fact a hot-spot for Leadbeater's possum detections. The possum is being found extensively in the regrowth stimulated by the 2009 bushfires and this was also explained to the ABC's researchers by the state's forestry agency, VicForests, but was ignored by the program.

- *"It's going to take 200 years for this to become habitat for species such as Leadbeater's Possum Greater Gliders, Yellow Bellied Gliders"* (Professor Lindenmayer).

This statement is false because the forest in question was, prior to harvesting, 80-year old regrowth mountain and alpine ash in which pre-harvest surveys had found no evidence of gliders or



Leadbeater's possum. Further to this, Leadbeater's possum is being readily found in harvested regrowth provided suitable nesting trees are present.

- *"Timber harvesting is allowed to have a significant impact on the species."* (Professor Woinarski)

This was allowed to go on the program unchallenged, despite the ABC's researchers having been told that most of the forest is not being used for timber harvesting. Further to this, pre-harvest surveys ensure that the planned harvest area is not occupied by Leadbeater's Possum, because wherever it is found it is protected in a 200-metre radius exclusion zone (ie. a 12.6 hectare reserve).

- *"I don't think it is possible to have a viable timber industry and the Leadbeater's Possum. I think we will lose it if we keep going the way we are going."* (Professor Wintle)

This was allowed to go on the program unchallenged, despite the ABC's researchers having been told that most of the forest is not being used for timber harvesting. The table of recent Leadbeater's Possum detections (below) shows that the species successfully co-exists with timber harvesting and, given the range of measures in place for its protection, there is no reason for this not to continue in-perpetuity.

Table 3. The forest age cohorts and most recent stand-replacing disturbance events within the 1 ha survey sites, and the number and percentage of sites with Leadbeater's Possum detections in the Central Highlands, November 2014–April 2016.

Last stand-replacing disturbance event	Stand age (years)	No. of sites	No. of sites where LBP was detected	% of sites where LBP was detected
1939 bushfire	77	120	54	45%
1983 bushfire	33	39	23	59%
1959–1977 timber harvesting	39–57	17	7	41%
1978–2005 timber harvesting	11–38	36	18	50%
1939 bushfire + younger timber harvesting regrowth	77 and 13–38	63	39	62%
1939 bushfire + older timber harvesting regrowth	77 and 39–50	14	8	57%
Total		289	149	52%

- *"The situation in Australia is that a lot of this work [ie. field surveying of Leadbeater's Possum] isn't being done by government agencies, and so if volunteers like us weren't doing it, it just wouldn't be done and the animals would be going extinct"* (Steve Meacher, anti-timber harvesting activist)



The Four Corners program allowed Steve Meacher's above claim to be aired despite it being made clear to the ABC's program researchers that Victorian Government scientists had detected most of the 535 new Leadbeater's Possum colonies found since 2014.

- *"We think that there are probably between 1,000 and 3,000 individuals, which is a very small population [of Leadbeater's Possum]"* (Steve Meacher, anti-timber harvesting activist)

Meacher was allowed to nominate the program's Leadbeater's Possum population estimate despite being an unqualified layperson rather than a scientist surveying the possum. In fact, the total number of documented colonies (688) found in just the ~10% portion of its range which has been surveyed thus far, suggests an estimated population range of 2,000 – 7,500 based on 3 to 11 individuals per colony. Clearly, its population estimate will be much larger than this when the whole of its potential habitat area (~204,000 hectares) is surveyed.

The ABC was made aware of this more informed population estimate but ignored it in when preparing the final program. Indeed, scientists working within Victorian forest management agencies expressed shock that their work was ignored by Four Corners, yet the program allowed an anti-timber harvesting activist with no qualifications in this field to make statements that could be readily challenged.

- *"Leadbeater's Possum as we know is a critically endangered species. It has suffered catastrophic population decline over the last 20 years"* (Professor Wintle)

Four Corners, through its program researchers' various discussions with forester Mark Poynter and VicForests personnel, as well as their possession of a published peer-reviewed paper (Poynter and Ryan, 2018), was made well aware that there were different scientific interpretations about the conservation status of Leadbeater's Possum. This included a strong contention that the original research conducted by the Australian National University (ANU) had been overtaken by the more recent work of Victorian Government scientists since 2014, which had found the possum to be far more numerous, resilient, and widespread, including in habitat types where it had never before been known.

Despite this, Four Corners accepted only the ANU version of the science (as expressed by its three interviewed conservation scientists). One of these interviewed scientists did acknowledge the improved survey methodology with its substantially higher rate of possum detection by Victorian Government scientists, but wrongly dismissed this as having little relevance in determining the population trend. It was also pointed out to the ABC that the new survey technique (as described in Nelson et al 2017) was based on targeted random surveying of forest areas across the various age classes and disturbance types and demonstrated very high detections (41-60%) within the 200 plus surveyed sites.

Four Corners accepted that the possum's absence on about half of the ANU's 32 long term monitoring research plots where it had previously been found, was incontrovertible evidence of a 'catastrophic population decline', despite its program researchers being informed that Victorian government scientists using their new and improved hi-tech survey methodology had found the possum to still be present in many of these supposedly vacated research plots.



Four Corner's also unquestioningly accepted the whole-of forest extrapolations about Leadbeater's Possum population estimates and declining habitat derived from the ANU's network of 163 permanent plots, even though it had been pointed out to its researchers (and in the interview with Mark Poynter) that these plots are acknowledged to be unrepresentative of the full range and weighting of age classes and structures that occur throughout the forest, thereby making extrapolations based on this plot data problematic.

For the program not to inform its audience that there were other scientific interpretations of the conservation status of Leadbeater's Possum created a bias towards an ANU narrative that aligns with vociferous anti-logging campaigns in which some ANU scientists have become participants (as was outlined in Poynter and Ryan 2018 which Four Corners was also well aware of).

5. Interviews

Bias introduced by lack of balance in who was interviewed

In relation to its forestry component, the program was biased by its over-reliance on interviews with three conservation biologists and an anti-forestry activist, while only one interview with a timber industry executive was allowed to provide some alternative views. We are aware that one of our members – forester Mr Mark Poynter – was interviewed, but his professionally informed views on practical forest management, which in-part contradict the activist and academic views on forests, were not included in the final program.

The program created a further bias by presenting Steve Meacher as a kindly wildlife rescue volunteer without any disclosure that he is a career anti-forestry activist whose lobby group – the Friends of Leadbeater's Possum – is, with the assistance of pro-bono lawyers, currently prosecuting a legal action against the state government agency, VicForests, in-part over Leadbeater's Possum; and that he was involved in an earlier failed legal action for which over a million dollars in legal costs have not yet been paid.

Further to this, the chief prosecution witness for the Friends of Leadbeater's Possum's current case against VicForests is Professor Woinarski who was also featured on the Four Corners program. Accordingly, the fact that the screening of the 'Extinction Nation' program coincided with the trial judge's deliberation on this current case is somewhat problematic.

Four Corners viewers would surely be interested in these associations, although to be fair, we are unsure of whether or not Four Corners was made aware of them.

Inconsistent interviewing style

From viewing the program there appears to be a distinct difference in interviewing style between the affable approach evident towards those promoting the notion of an extinction emergency, and the more aggressive and at times rude, interrupting approach apparent in the interview with Federal Environment Minister, Sussan Ley. Even though not shown on the program, we are aware that parts of the program's interviews of Mark Poynter and Ross Hampton were aggressive and hostile presumably because they were contradicting the notion of timber production as an agent of extinction in relation to the two featured forest-dwelling species.



Further to this, the program's door-stop interview with Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews was embarrassingly aggressive and rude, although it must be acknowledged that Mr Andrews had perhaps provoked such an approach by preventing personnel employed by VicForests or other government agencies, from publicly speaking on forest management issues.

Polarisation of the narrative

Along with the omission of critical context about the pre-existing balance between forests used versus those already reserved, the program's choice of interviewees (ie. 4 pro-environment versus one timber industry spokesman) created a falsely polarised program narrative that would have led the average, unaware viewer to conclude that all forests will be logged and so preventing extinctions will necessitate closing the timber industry.

6. Conclusions

In assessing the forestry coverage in *Extinction Nation*, it appears the ABC has sought to make a sensationalist anti-timber harvesting piece that could assist in adding to conservation propaganda, especially in relation to Leadbeater's Possum. Unfortunately, this approach is entirely unhelpful for members of the public wanting to genuinely understand balance of the issues involved.

In our view, this program has failed to deliver on its Charter obligations and further eroded the ABC's reputation in regard to environmental reporting given the acknowledged bias and agenda of most previous reporting of forestry issues, most notably including "Something in the Water" (Australian Story, 2010) and "Lords of the Forests" (Four Corners, 2004).

References

- Nelson J., Durkin L., Cripps J., Scroggie M., Bryant D., Macak P., Lumsden L. 2017. *Targeted surveys to improve Leadbeater's Possum conservation*, ARI Technical Report Series No. 278, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.
- Poynter M. and Ryan M. 2018. Leadbeater's possum and Victoria's Central Highlands forests: flawed science and environmental activism as drivers of forest management change, *Australian Forestry*, Vol 81 No.4: 250-272.