

## After the closure of VicForests, senior staff have joined a new forest venture

By national science and environment reporter [Michael Slezak](#)

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Professor David Lindenmayer says The Healthy Forests Foundation is "just a way of keeping the [logging] industry going". (Supplied: David Lindenmayer)

**In short:** The former CEO of one of Australia's biggest loggers has teamed up with other powerful industry bosses to set up a new organisation.

Called The Healthy Forests Foundation, the group says it aims to promote holistic forest management.

**What's next?** One researcher says the move amounts to "greenwashing on steroids", while Indigenous leaders have divided opinions about the group.

As June 30 approached, one of Australia's biggest native logging companies, the scandal-plagued VicForests, was preparing to shut its doors.

It was a moment pitched as the end of native logging in Victoria.

But as she worked to shutter VicForests, the organisation's CEO, Monique Dawson, was already working with other powerful logging bosses to set up a brand new organisation – The Healthy Forests Foundation, which would hire loggers and logging lobbyists from VicForests and elsewhere.

The Healthy Forests Foundation's core purpose, according to ASIC documents, is "the protection and enhancement of the natural environment".

David Lindenmayer from ANU has another view.

"The aim is just to work out ways to keep cutting the forest. It's a front — it's just a way of keeping the [logging] industry going," Professor Lindenmayer said.

In documents registered with ASIC, The Healthy Forests Foundation says part of its purpose is to promote First Nations forest management, which proponents admit will also supply timber.

A prominent proponent of First Nations forest management, Dja Dja Wurrung elder and CEO of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DJAARA) Rodney Carter said the organisation's creation was a positive thing.

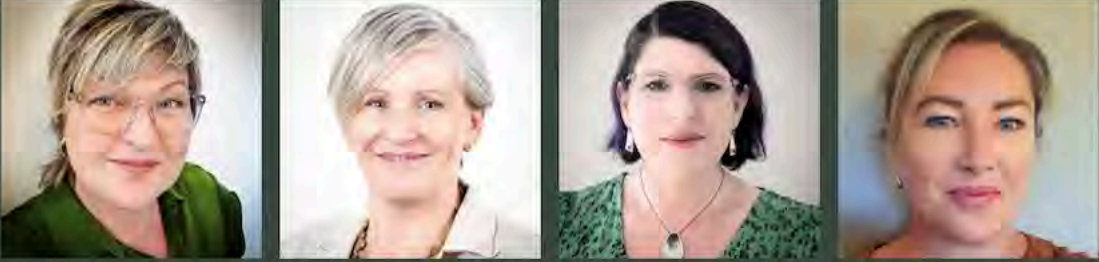
But he agreed with Professor Lindenmayer, that the people behind it were interested in timber production.

"I think they're trying to fill a void that they believe is created from not having a hardwood timber industry."

After the ABC began inquiring about the organisation, it launched its website, which claims Australia has many areas of unhealthy forests.

It said: "By applying Traditional Owner Knowledge with the best available science we will identify unhealthy or vulnerable forests, develop a plan and manage projects to implement the plan."

# Team



<p><b>Monique Dawson</b>  <b>CEO &amp; Managing Director</b>            LLB, Grad Dip Leg Prac (QUT)            FIPAA (Vic), MAICD</p> <p>Monique has 20 years' experience working at the highest levels of the public service in Queensland, New Zealand and Victoria. She has led large corporate, policy and</p>	<p><b>Deb Kerr</b>  <b>Sponsorships &amp; Grants Leader</b>            BMgmt (Usyd)</p> <p>Deb has over 20 years' experience, including in senior executive management, and brings a wealth of knowledge and experience in government relations, advocacy, policy</p>	<p><b>Brooke Garas</b>  <b>Communications &amp; Information Leader</b>            BSc(Biol), Mcomm &amp; MediaST</p> <p>Brooke is an experienced communications professional experience working in government, research, industry and university sectors including the CSIRO. Her</p>	<p><b>Tanya Britton</b>  <b>Project Coordinator Eastern Victoria</b>            Dip. N. R. Mgt.</p> <p>Tanya specialises in holistic forest management including, bringing a comprehensive skill set aimed at preserving and enhancing natural ecosystems and protecting threatened</p>
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Ms Dawson told the ABC that any claims about the organisation's intent are "premature" since it's still in start-up mode.

"The science is settled that the greatest threats to the health of Australia's forests are invasive species, fire and climate change. The Foundation's work will be focusing on these threats and led by the views and Knowledge of the local Custodians in collaboration with the local community," she said.

Some First Nations leaders are excited about the opportunities, and say removing trees is part of "healing country".

One Indigenous leader said the Healthy Forests Foundation looked like "black cladding" — a way for largely non-Indigenous industries to gain access to resources by taking advantage of Indigenous peoples' access.

Either way, the move puts First Nations people at the centre of Australia's heated logging debate.

## A new job for Victoria's scandal-plagued loggers

VicForests' June 30 closure followed allegations of widespread and illegal logging, referrals to corruption watchdogs and revelations the organisation had spied on conservationists.



According to the Victorian government, that put an end to Victoria's commercial native logging industry.

But some are now worried this new venture shows loggers are still looking for opportunities to continue cutting the forest.

On her LinkedIn page, Ms Dawson announced she would be the CEO of the new organisation.

And within weeks key staff from VicForests announced they had also joined the new foundation including VicForests' communications manager, the traditional owner project manager as well as an environmental consultant.

Deb Kerr, the CEO of logging lobby group the Victoria Forests Product Association, announced she had quit her role and was taking a job at the new foundation.

Sitting on the board of the Healthy Forests Foundation with Ms Dawson — were two of the most powerful people in native logging: Malcolm McComb and Ian Sedger.

The pair are owners and directors of companies built on the logging of Australia's native forests: Pentarch Group and Allied Natural Wood Enterprises (ANWE). The two companies own a woodchip mill and multiple sawmills and operate native forest logging activities.

Also on the board of the company as secretary is Richard Conheady, the corporate governance manager at Pentarch.

A short time later, David Bartlett joined the board. He was the premier of Tasmania from 2008 to 2011, and oversaw a forestry deal there which saw the industry paid \$277 million in return for greater protections for forests.

So far, besides Mr Bartlett, everyone the ABC has found linked to the new not-for-profit company has worked for the logging industry.



None of the people publicly associated with the not-for-profit company publicly identify as First Nation people on its website, and it didn't respond to questions asking whether there were any First Nations people involved.

But a spokesperson for the Healthy Forests Foundation said the current board is only interim, and it is considering further interim appointments.

"New Directors will be appointed at a future AGM when the foundation has established a membership base," the spokesperson said.

Ms Dawson said: "The foundation welcomes new members, supporters and volunteers who wish to be part of a positive nature-focused environmental movement – interested people can sign up through our website."

Professor Lindenmayer, who spent decades studying the impacts of logging on forests, described the Healthy Forests Foundation as "greenwashing on steroids".

"It's kind of like the 'healthy smoking foundation'," he said.

"The industry is just finding new ways to keep logging the forest when more than 80 per cent of Australians want native forest logging stopped.

"This is a disgrace. An absolute travesty and people should be aware of what's going on here," Professor Lindemayer said.

But the Healthy Forests Foundation could represent the new face of logging in Victoria and beyond.

### **The new face of logging?**

A lot of Victorian logging has occurred on the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, whose country takes in the northern part of the timber-rich Central Highlands.

Mr Carter argues his people should now take over the management of forests across the Dja Dja Wurrung nation. That includes removing trees using industrial logging machinery.



He has no formal links to the Healthy Forests Foundation but has been advocating for the approach it's supporting, and he worked with Ms Dawson when she was at VicForests.

He knew of the foundation's development and said it was a promising thing.

"I think they're trying to fill a void that they believe is created from not having a hardwood timber industry."

His organisation calls the removal of trees from country "cultural thinning" – part of a broader strategy dubbed "forest gardening".

"Thinning" is a common logging technique, and DJAARA is transparent in saying it would do that work using the strategies and heavy machinery of the logging industry.

"There's too many trees of certain types that aren't conducive to good ecosystem function," Mr Carter said.

He said timber for the existing industry can be a "by-product" of the gardening he wants his people to do.

Mr Carter said in some instances, instead of aiming to replant with trees as was required of VicForests, he'd like them replaced with grasses and lilies to keep the forest more open and accessible.

Jack Pascoe, a Yuiin man and ecologist from the University of Melbourne, supports the idea of First Nations people thinning forests.

He said there wasn't enough evidence to always know what thinning the forest would do, but there's also not much evidence that leaving forests alone helps them either.



"The only way you can gather evidence is to start from a point of beginning to do the experimental work," he said.

Professor Lindenmayer said the idea that forests were helped by removing trees was "categorically false" — especially in the tall wet forests that exist in much of Victoria.

DJAARA documents have described "Cultural thinning" not as traditional practice, but as a "contemporary cultural practice".

Mr Carter agreed his ancestors weren't removing significant numbers of trees, but he said tree thinning was a "cultural practice" because it stemmed from an ancient way of looking at country, and how it interacts with people.

Gary Murray is a Dja Dja Wurrung elder, who helped set up DJAARA. He disagreed with Mr Carter, saying his community wasn't consulted enough on the idea.

"There's been limited discussions about forest gardening. Members at the next AGM will be raising what's going on," he said.

Speaking of First Nations people across Victoria, Mr Murray said: "We're environmentalists. We're not loggers ... and we want to protect our landscapes."

"Our view is don't cut trees down — grow more."

Mr Murray said the Healthy Forests Foundation looks like "blak cladding".

"It is not self-determination. It is tokenism."

In an emailed response to those allegations, a spokesperson for the Healthy Forests Foundation said they were "offensive and racist".

"Such accusations clearly amount to disinformation. Our engagement with Traditional Owners will be guided by them and respectful."

### Read more

#### VICFORESTS CLOSURE

**State-owned logging company VicForests will cease to exist from June 30**

By [Rochelle Kirkham](#) and [William Howard](#)

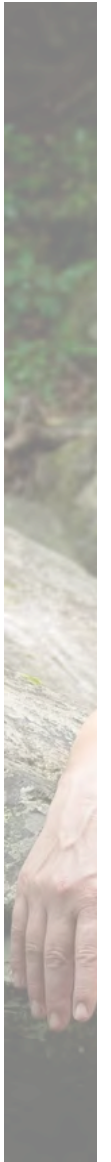
#### VICFORESTS

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*Environmentalists walk through a logged forest at Toolangi.*

Legal representatives for VicForest reveal it will cease to exist beyond June, after multiple court cases and heavy scrutiny of its business practices.



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