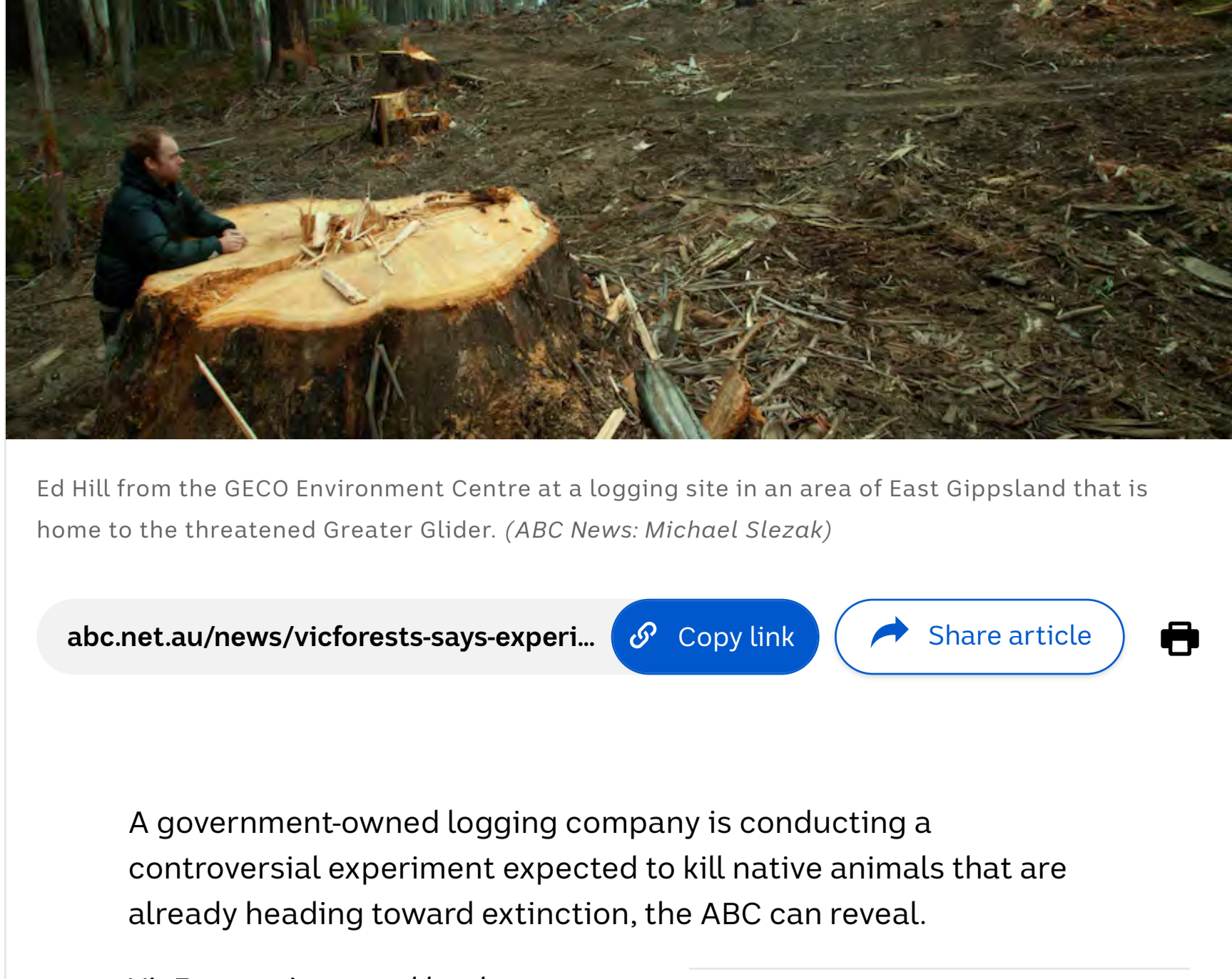


# VicForests says experiment 'very likely' to kill threatened glider, continues research

Exclusive by national environment, science and technology reporter Michael Slezak  
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Ed Hill from the GECO Environment Centre at a logging site in an area of East Gippsland that is home to the threatened Greater Glider. (ABC News: Michael Slezak)

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A government-owned logging company is conducting a controversial experiment expected to kill native animals that are already heading toward extinction, the ABC can reveal.

VicForests is owned by the Victorian Government and logs native forests for profit under exemptions to federal environment law.

It is now logging parts of East Gippsland forest at different intensities to measure survival rates of the threatened greater gliders that call it home.

VicForests argued the research would assist the conservation of the species, but acknowledged it was likely to kill some of them.

In an email seen by the ABC that addressed similar logging nearby, VicForests' staff acknowledged deaths were likely.

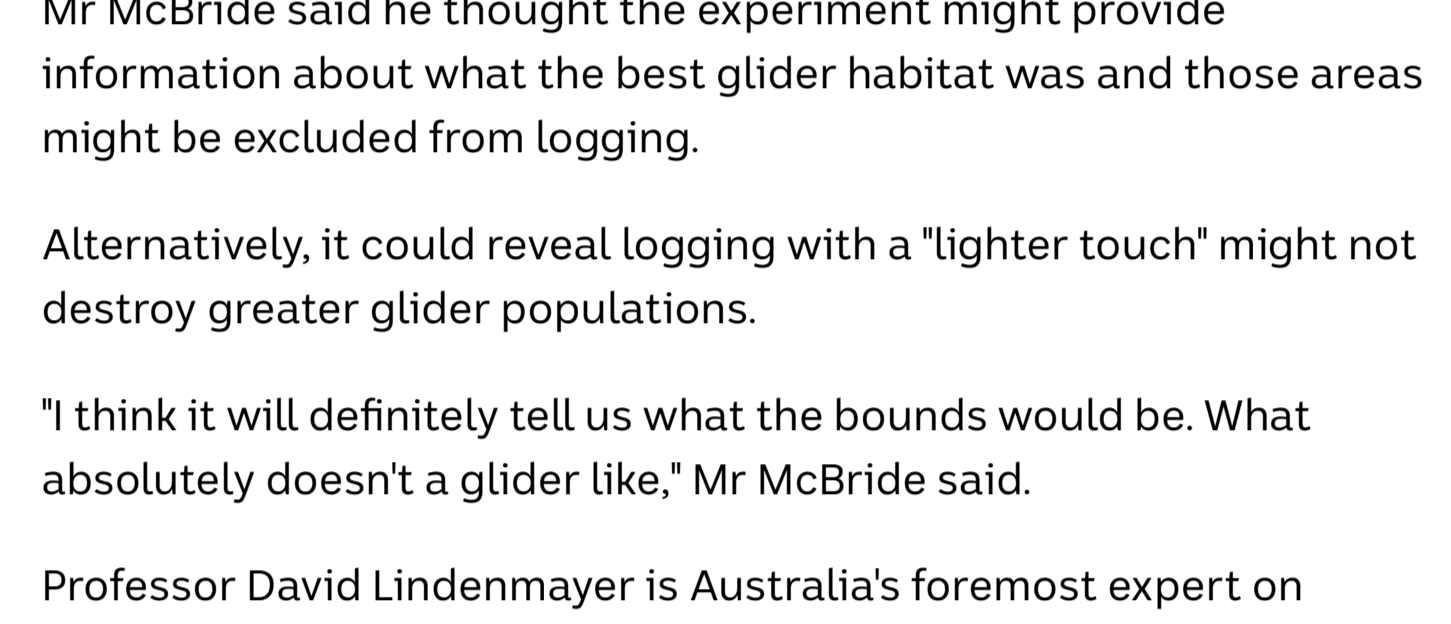
"It is unfortunate that some individuals have to die in the process, but we really need to look at the big picture here," a VicForests ecologist wrote.

And when asked if gliders that survived the initial logging would die when VicForests burnt the leftover wood, the company's manager of biodiversity conservation Tim McBride said: "Yep, that's a very likely outcome."

Greater gliders — also known as "clumsy possums" — are the world's second-largest gliding mammal. Until recently they were common in forests across eastern Australia from north Queensland all the way to Victoria.

In the last couple of decades, their populations have crashed, declining by at least 30 per cent across their range and completely disappearing from some areas where they previously thrived.

## Logging company unhappy with existing research



A pile of trees smoulder after logging and burning activity moved through an area of East Gippsland. (ABC News: Michael Slezak)

Mr McBride told the ABC the existing body of research on how to conserve greater gliders was not balanced because it was "all about preservation".

"The literature doesn't support a balanced approach," he said.

Responding to a suggestion that research conducted by VicForests could itself be skewed, he said the company did have a "vested interest" in conservation.

"But they are also interested in ... supplying an outcome to stakeholders — the timber industry stakeholders," Mr McBride said.

"And we want to maintain a wood-flow to them, and so finding that balance is key."

Mr McBride said he thought the experiment might provide information about what the best glider habitat was and those areas might be excluded from logging.

Alternatively, it could reveal logging with a "lighter touch" might not destroy greater glider populations.

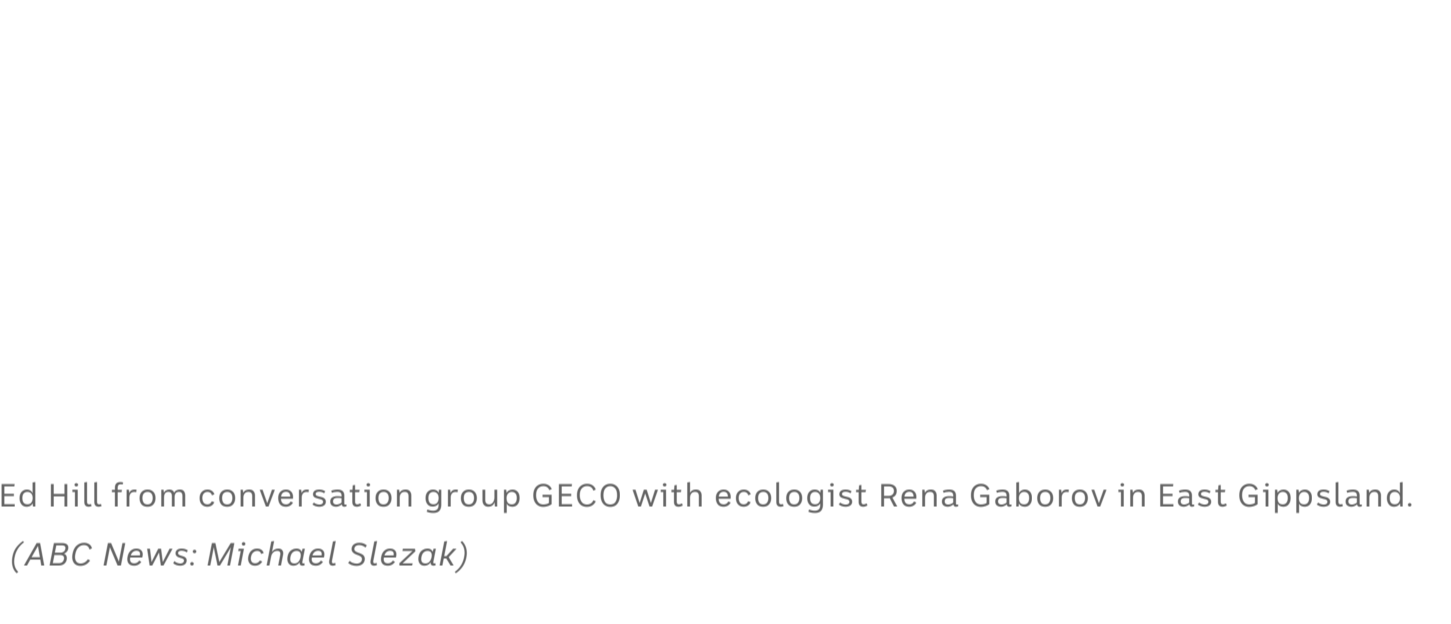
"I think it will definitely tell us what the bounds would be. What absolutely doesn't a glider like," Mr McBride said.

Professor David Lindenmayer is Australia's foremost expert on greater gliders as well as on the forests they live in. He said the experiment was unethical.

"I see that as the terrestrial equivalent of so-called 'scientific whaling', where the Japanese have eaten the results," he said.

"The evidence is quite clear. We don't need to go back and continue to look at these kinds of things when we already see quite clearly what the impacts are on these species."

## 'I can't believe we're doing this in 2018'



Greater gliders are known as the "clumsy possum". (Supplied: Jasmine Zeleny)

The ABC visited two areas near Bendoc in Victoria logged in the experiment, accompanied by conservationist Ed Hill and local ecologist Rena Gaborov.

In one of those areas, a pre-logging survey revealed at least 10 greater gliders lived in the area now logged. If they had found one more glider, existing regulations would have halted logging in that location.

In the second area visited by the ABC, no pre-harvest survey was done in the logged area.

When shown footage of those experimental locations, Professor Lindenmayer said the gliders that lived there would perish.

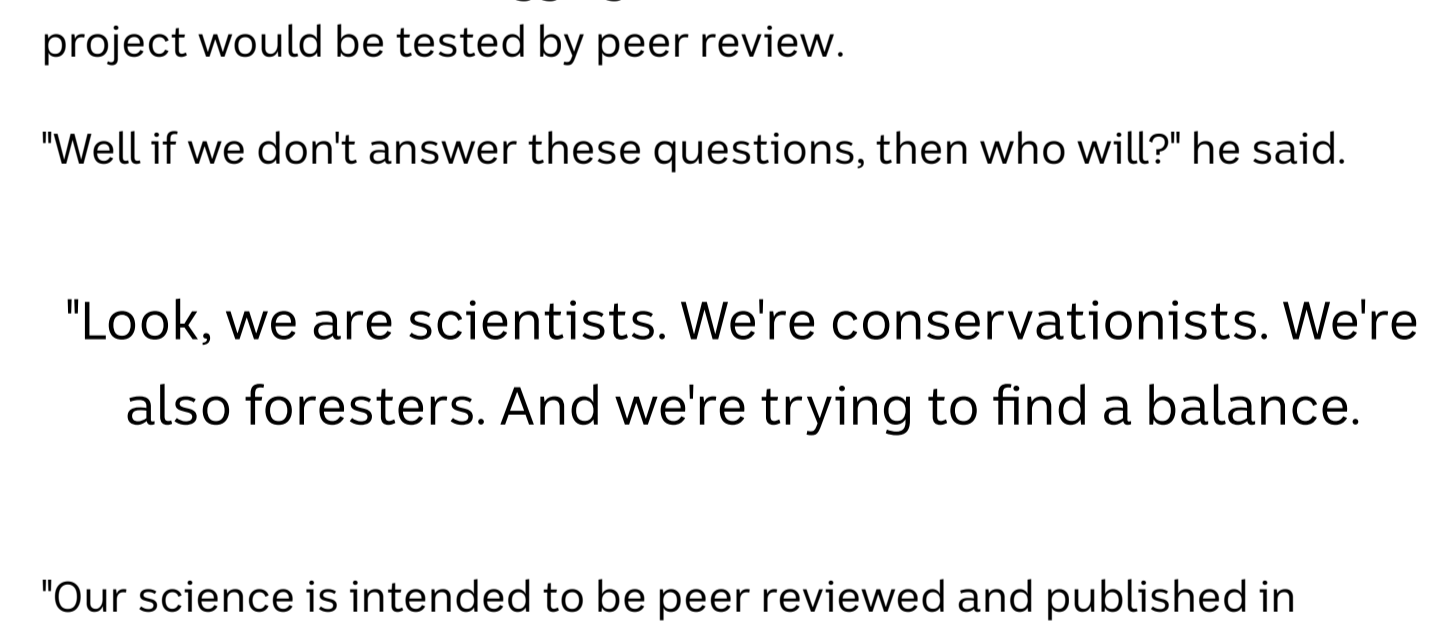
"They're going to die. They'll die on site. That's almost assured," he said.

Professor Lindenmayer said logging should be banned wherever greater gliders were found.

"The days where we are logging areas where we have threatened animals — they should be long gone. I can't believe we're doing this in 2018."

Ms Gaborov called the project an "oxymoron".

"They're logging threatened species' habitat and trying to look like they're doing something good for the species at the same time, but really it's an oxymoron," she said.



Ed Hill from conversation group GECO with ecologist Rena Gaborov in East Gippsland. (ABC News: Michael Slezak)

## Department 'raised questions' over experiment design

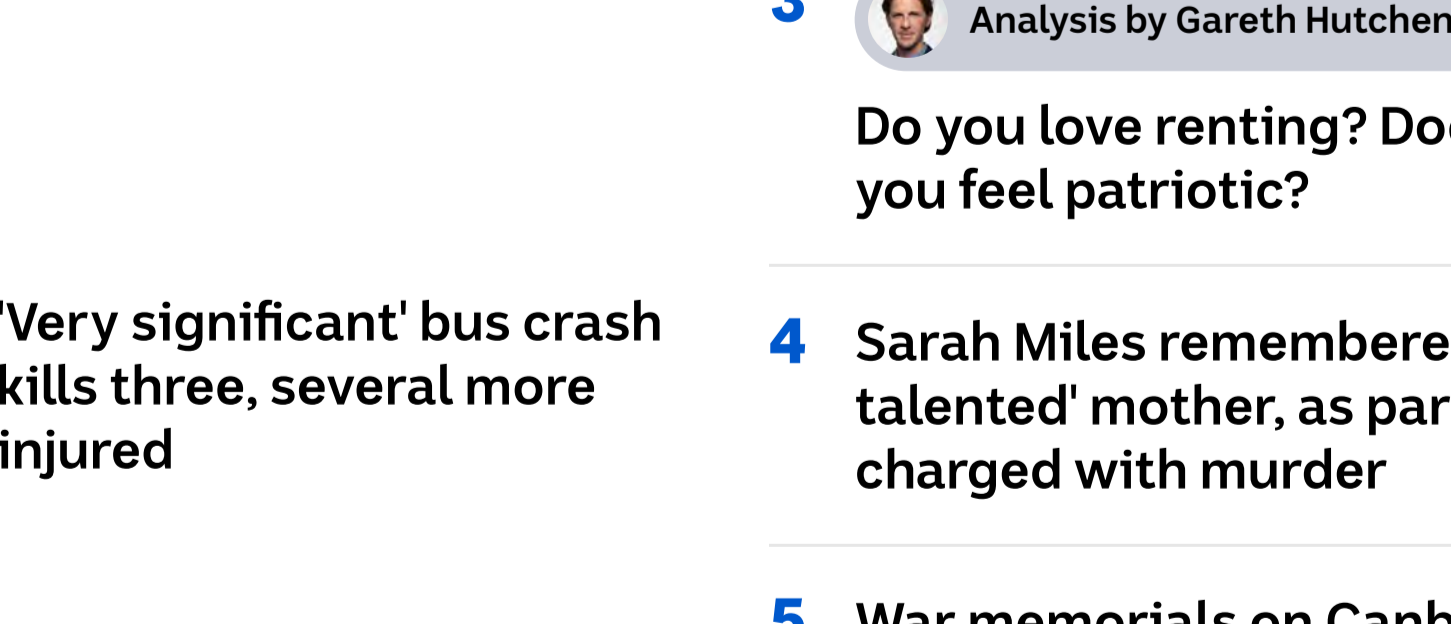
VicForests said the experiment was designed "in collaboration" with Victoria's Department of Environment and its biodiversity research institute, the Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI).

But when the ABC asked about their involvement, ARI's head of wildlife ecology Lindy Lumsden said they were "not involved in designing it".

She said they "attended one meeting to discuss it and provide feedback". Moreover, Dr Lumsden said they saw problems with the approach of the experiment.

"We raised questions on their sampling design, underlying assumptions and ability to be able to draw valid conclusions from their proposed study," she said.

"We suggested ways the design could be improved to make it more scientifically rigorous."



A Greater Glider can be seen high in a tree in an area of East Gippsland that has been earmarked for logging. (ABC News: Michael Slezak)

A spokeswoman for VicForests said the company "incorporated advice and suggestions where appropriate to improve the experimental design".

Victorian Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio declined several requests for an interview on the topic and did not respond to questions about the experiment.

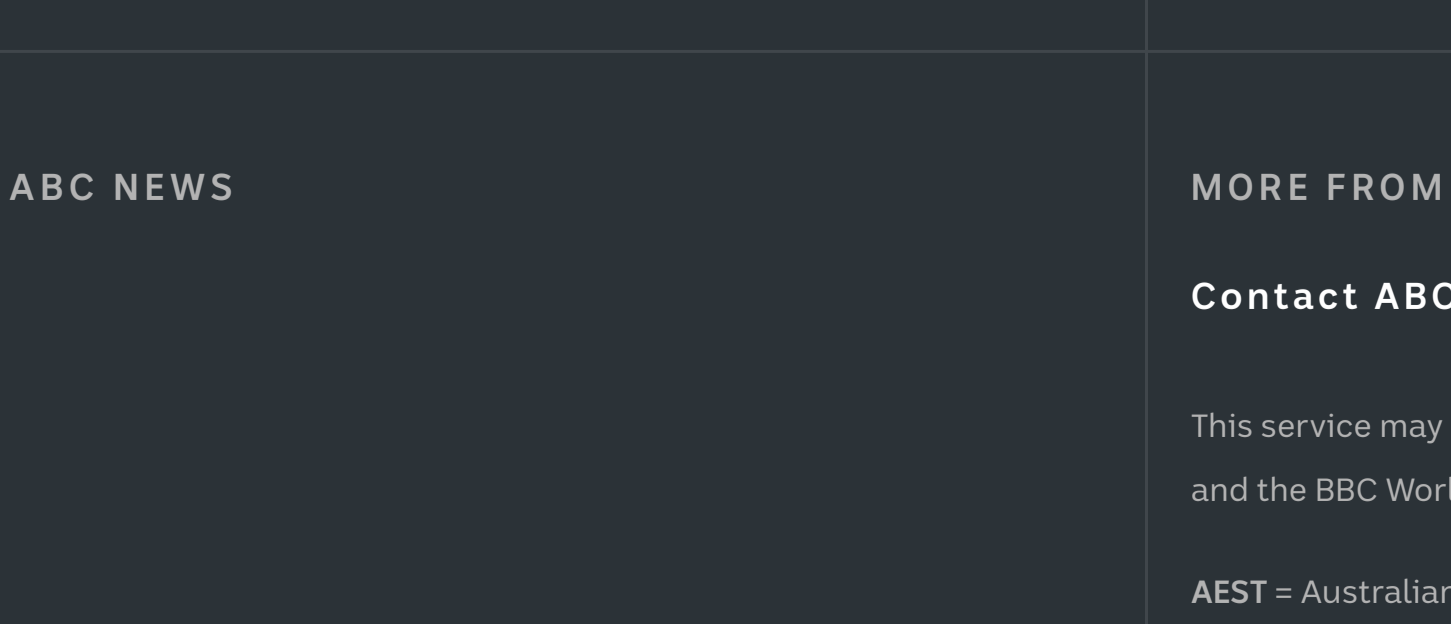
A spokesman for the Minister said they would "soon be releasing a draft plan with actions to help protect their populations in Victoria".

VicForests emphasised only 0.04 per cent of Victoria's forest was available to them for logging. Mr McBride said, in the end, the project would be tested by peer review.

"Well if we don't answer these questions, then who will?" he said.

"Look, we are scientists. We're conservationists. We're also foresters. And we're trying to find a balance.

"Our science is intended to be peer reviewed and published in journals, and at that time, if it stands the test of peer review and is accepted, then it's science, but that's what our aim is."



East Gippsland forest has been earmarked for logging. (ABC News: Michael Slezak)

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