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<http://www.theage.com.au/national/a-battle-thats-far-from-black-and-white-20100626-zb1s.html>

By Jenny Denton

On Tuesday, after a long and often divisive battle, 150,000 hectares of new national park and reserve will be declared along the Murray in northern Victoria.

The Barmah forest, the southern section of Australia's biggest red gum forest— described by some as the “Kakadu of the south”— will become one of four new national parks and will be jointly managed by its Aboriginal traditional owners.

At nearly 30,000 hectares it is a significant chunk of the area to be protected on the recommendation of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council following an exhaustive three-year investigation into the state of the red gum forests.

While Yorta Yorta leaders are optimistic about the new park and environmentalists are delighted by their campaign win, many white locals around the forest are bitter about the change which they say will lock up the land they have lived in and used sustainably over generations.

Outside the Barmah pub bumpers are emblazoned with stickers with the slogans, “Red gums for all & forever” and “No flamin' red gum national parks”. Inside, a wood stove burns red gum around the clock to heat the main room. The bar, stretching from one wall to the other, is a huge slab of red gum sawn at the local mill. The proposal to convert their “backyard” state forest into national park and give local indigenous people some control over its management has stirred anger in the white communities around the forest, who lodged submissions in their thousands and formed campaigning organisations opposing the plan.

There is a small tourism industry here and crops and cattle in the area but at least in popular belief timber has been the lifeblood of the town, and locals claim it has been harvested sustainably, for the benefit of the forest, over generations.

“We'd worked in the bush for that many years,” says 78-year-old mill owner Jerry Swan. “We didn't want to see it go and disappear. The thing is it's regenerating the whole time and it would go on forever. With a sensible cut, it would just go on forever and ever.”

Swan, who started working in the forest as a 12-year-old, during school holidays, remembers trees that were “fallen” as far back as 70 years ago, and knows where many of them were hauled to.

His father was a sleeper cutter, a master axeman who would ringbark a tree so precisely that half a century later his son claims to be able to identify his work by the thinness of scars left behind on old trunks.

Since logging ceased in Barmah last June Swan has been cleaning up the wood in his yard in preparation for retirement. He's eligible for an \$80,000 compensation payment from the state government, but in a cruel twist of fate his wife, who was diagnosed with cancer two weeks after "they pulled the pin on the bush", died a few months ago.

According to the non-indigenous locals of Barmah, anger about the conversion of the forest into national park stems not just from the sour grapes of lost livelihoods but also from a real scepticism about the resourcing and management of national parks.

But Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation President Neville Atkinson is in no doubt about the impacts on the forest of logging and grazing or the need for national parks.

"I don't think they've really realised the continual negative impact they've had on these fragile areas," Atkinson says of the timber and cattle industries. "What we're going to be left with now is a changed landscape because of these past activities, and it's going to take us a long time to get it back to some sort of natural balance".

"To save all these areas, to me it's a no-brainer."

Cattle have been banned from Barmah forest for two years now, and Peter Newman, chairman of the Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance — which produces the bumper stickers — says that without cattle eating the palatable grass and weeds and trampling vegetation there is a hugely-increased fire risk in the forest.

Newman, whose property fronts it, argues that cattle have grazed in large numbers in the forest for more than 150 years without causing significant damage.

As well as fire, he says he's worried about floods, weeds and pests under the new management — with the public shooting of feral animals also to be banned in the new park.

Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority ecologist Keith Ward, who is involved in discussions on the management of the new national park, says cattle grazing hasn't been ruled out and would be considered if research showed it would benefit the forest.

"But I think the way things were going, the pendulum was far too far the other way. As a botanist trying to undertake flora surveys there, [I can say] it wasn't a reserve; it was an out-paddock for cattle, Ward says.

Under natural conditions, the majority of Barmah-Millewa would have been flooded for several months a year, during winter and spring. But with water so highly contested and the flow of the Murray subject to irrigator demand downstream, the release of water through regulators in the Barmah forest to set its streams running happens in summer for much shorter periods and at greatly reduced volumes.

Water management – flood times, frequency and quantity – are another subject of criticism by opponents of the park, who believe those in charge of it "don't know what they're doing".

According to Peter Newman, “Making it a national park – unless they do something about water – will have no impact whatsoever”.

Keith Ward, who is responsible for managing water in Barmah, has no guarantees about more of it being delivered.

“I would love to flood the forests – like out to the banks; everyone wants it,” he says. “Where are we going to get the water?”

For the Yorta Yorta people who lost a long-running native title battle in 2002, the new deal is not just about the environment and traditional connections to the land, Neville Atkinson says. It’s also “a social justice package” he expects will bring about a huge shift in his people’s social and economic status.

“One thing in Australia’s favour I think is when they realise that things have been wrong they’ve admitted it, and then made up the ground. So I think that’s just about where we’re at at the moment – making up some ground”.

Of the tensions in town Atkinson says, “I think it would be irresponsible of all of us if we didn’t start to put an end to this battle”.

“People need to consider ... it’s not just about them today; it’s about future generations.”