



The fight for Monga

Michael Gill, Christine Payne and Harry Laing have all been heavily involved in the fight to save Monga forest. Here they tell of their journey through outrage, art and activism

Christine leads off ...

When we bought our land in Reidsdale, we were looking for a place right next to a national park but we couldn't actually find anywhere so we got as close as we could.

As we bought our land Michael said to me, "You know, that's all state forest. I bet it'll happen that we'll have to fight for it one day; it will be logged". And it came true.

Harry: That was extremely prescient.

Michael: Our first involvement with Monga was through teaching botanical illustration at a summer school we ran in Canberra. We got Val Plumwood to do a day's walk with us and our students; she was fabulous. Val gave us all the names of everything, told lots of stories and then Michael photographed everything because we couldn't take away samples.

Anyway, then we had a wonderful week of botanical illustration in our little school in Canberra and that's

how we started to love Monga. We just used to go for lovely walks in there and became really inspired.

Then we got a letter from Robyn Stellar, handwritten; scribbled really rapidly ...

Michael: Saying congratulations for not having a fight with Val, and getting on with her and doing something positive about the rare plants of Monga.

Christine: No, no, she said, "It's going to be logged, this is our last chance to fight for it. We want everybody, if you can, to write a letter," and from that we suddenly thought, "all right, looks like it's on". I think a lot of people in Friends of the Mongarlowe River did actually write letters to Bob Carr, and that resulted in part of it being gazetted, but that was a long way down the track.

Harry: It was. You're referring to the Regional Forest Agreement process, which was started in '99 when Carr got in again.

HUGGING

HOW THIS STORY CAME TO BE HERE:

Late last year the Friends of the Mongarlowe River decided to record the story of FMR's early days. Some of the major players are sadly no longer with us, but those who remain were generous with their time and many hours of recollections were recorded.

Some time in the future the best bits will be combined with other material to make a video telling the FRM story. To whet your appetite, here then, are bits and pieces from the interviews mainly centring around the fight against the charcoal factory and the logging of Monga forest.

Michael: We called it The Regional Forest Aggrievement.

Christine: We did a banner on it, one of many, many dozens of banners.

Michael: And placards.

Harry: A lot of places were under deferred logging, or under moratorium, whilst the RFA was being sorted out. It did get gazetted in 2000, eighty percent, but a big reverse L-shape of three compartments was left out.

Christine: In the middle of it.

Michael: There was a sign going down the Clyde, a National Parks and Wildlife sign which said 'Monga National Park' and one night, very late, we stopped and put another sign near that one, which said, 'Only 80% National Park'.

We'd stopped the week before and taken a rubbing of the letters to get the colours right, so it looked like an official National Park sign. I remember Bronwyn, who was the ranger at the time, at one of our meetings said, "I was travelling down the Clyde the other day, and I saw our official sign and suddenly says it's only 80% National Park. You wouldn't happen to know who did that, would you?" We said, "Yes, we would." And she said, "Well, I'd like to shake their hands."



TREES

Christine: It stayed up a long time, they didn't immediately pull it down.

Harry: The eco-warriors, aka 'the ferals' with their amazing vehicle called 'The Beast' you knew quite well because they spent a bit of time at your place. This was during the great fight for those compartments that State Forest were logging in 2001.

Christine: They needed safe houses, so if they were being chased by the police they could rush to various people's places. Val Plumwood's was also one such safe place.

Michael: What would happen is: the eco-warriors tended to be young people, very fit, very committed, and they were in a small mob. They loved Monga with a passion.

Even Val Plumwood had trouble matching the passion of these young people. They often used to do what was called 'black wallaby'. The loggers would be in there taking down trees and numbering them and marking them.

Then out from the bush would pop one of the eco-warriors, the forest rescue people. As soon as that happened, someone unauthorised was in the logging compartment and work had to stop. This is a very, very effective technique.

Of course they were chased. They were chased by the logger's son, by the police and by friends of the loggers. But they were never caught. They were very strong people who knew Monga better than anybody else. The police were often hot on their trail.

Landholders would give them a key to the gate. They would come in, lock the gate and rush down to the creek and hide. When the police arrived nobody knew anything.

The Charcoalition

Michael: One Easter, when the charcoal factory was on the point of falling to pieces, somebody, or somebody's friends, went on a mission down the Clyde Mountain. There are forty-eight RTA signs on that road.

The backs of them were used as graffiti billboards to trash the charcoal factory and what was happening in Monga. The front of the signs weren't damaged in any way, just the back of them.

I think thirty-six of them were graffitied time and time again. Especially, one Easter when all of Canberra would be heading to the Coast. They would read half the backs of the signs going down the hill and they would read the other half coming back home to Canberra.



That was an enormously successful campaign. It got written up in the *Canberra Times* and other places. But it was done in an unauthorised way. The Charcoalition did not authorise that.

Christine: But they were in rhyming couplets.

Michael: And that's why some activists don't join committees. That's not a confession by the way.

Harry: That's an interesting point. The fight to save things must be on many fronts. Not all the fronts are going to either agree with each other, for sure, or even know sometimes what others are doing. But, it's all coming into this point, the point of the forest, the river. And of course that can lead to huge passions which can get out of control.

Michael: Usually, someone has to go to gaol. And in your case, it nearly was you.

Harry: Yup. Although I really do put myself low down in the pecking order in the activist thing. I was at 'protest bridge' the time that the three of us got arrested. One of the eco-warriors said, "Look, I can't get arrested any more. It's happened too often. I'll be in a really bad, bad way."

And I knew, I've always known, I don't have that level of amazing commitment. Whilst the blood would rush during the 'black wallaby', I would have just sh*t myself too much.

My arrest was really very symbolic. It had a certain effect because people hadn't been arrested for a long time in New South Wales forests.

Christine: And you weren't a scruffy feral; you see, that counts for a lot.

Harry: The cartoon in the *Batemans Bay Post* had the magistrate asking, "Is that Armani you're wearing?"

Michael: Three defendants beautifully turned down.

Harry: John Reed in his jacket, Noel Plum probably in a blazer.

Christine: All over 40.

Harry: Yes, armed with so many character witnesses you wouldn't believe.

Michael: The newspaper reported on what the magistrate had to say to the three defendants and it was all one hundred percent on-side and complimentary. She almost got down and shook their hands in public. It was beautifully recorded. It was a great win. When you can get an outcome like that it's really worth being arrested.



WHEN EUROBODALLA SHIRE WENT COOL ON THE PLAN FOR A CHARCOAL PLANT AT MOGO, TALLAGANDA SHIRE COUNCIL TOYED WITH THE IDEA OF HOSTING IT HERE.