



## News – John Middendorf on the logging of takayna/Tarkine

NEWS

By ADVENTURETYPES

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**We speak to Tasmania’s John Middendorf, a long-time climber, climbing-gear designer and owner of D4, a portaledge manufacturer, about his activism in the old-growth forests of takayna/Tarkine, both in supporting the protests by helping out with gear and doing tree-sits himself.**

**Can you tell us what is happening in takayna/Tarkine and in the Sumac Forest specifically, and why it is so important to protect the area?**

Currently 52 logging coupes – thousands of hectares of forest – are scheduled to be logged in takayna/Tarkine. Each coupe involves building a road deep into the wilderness to allow bulldozers and heavy equipment to clearfell large areas of habitat. Ultimately a few saw logs are collected, but 95% of the bio-

mass is left as waste or wood chip. Most of this work is done by small crews of two or three people who operate a variety of heavy industrial earth movers transported to site. After extracting logs and the largest shards of smashed eucalyptus, the areas are then firebombed and reseeded, creating a hole in the wilderness that never recovers its original complex biota.



*John tree sitting in takayna/Tarkine. Photo by Tim Cooper/tcooperphoto.com*

Most of takayna/Tarkine is pristine wilderness old-growth forest, despite effective propaganda from the state-run 'Sustainable Timbers Tasmania', who claim that a few specialty timbers hand-cleared a hundred years ago classifies some of these wilderness areas as 'regrowth', thus justified for clearfelling and fire-bombing. Critical habitat is completely destroyed.

The roads are perhaps the biggest crime, they create usage problems and destroy the character of the wilderness. Perhaps the most significant reason to preserve takayna/Tarkine is that it is part of a larger ecosystem that extends all the way south to the Cradle Mountain area – it is the largest temperate rainforest in Australia. Currently only a tiny fraction of it is protected as the Savage River National Park (see map below), and it is an ecosystem in peril, with many endangered species under threat.

The Sumac ridge is the front line, but as we speak there are other pristine wilderness areas being effectively shredded, notably the Rapid River area, which is behind 15km of locked gates and so much harder to

blockade.



*takayna/Tarkine; the only part of region that is properly protected is the small area that falls within the Savage River National Park*

**Aside from the value of the forest simply as an incredible repository of wilderness, have there been any estimates of how much carbon is locked up in takayna/Tarkine that would be released by clearfelling these areas?**

Australia is far behind the rest of the developed nations in terms of its study and understanding of its last remaining natural wilderness. For example, the last nationwide wilderness study was conducted in 1996. Lots of wilderness since then has been lost, and there is nothing to stop the destruction of most of Australia's last remaining wilderness in the next few decades. Unlike the USA, Australia doesn't have a Wilderness Act, which at least requires all land managers to inventory their dwindling wilderness every year. So public funding for things like carbon store analysis are way back on the back burner, remarkably in this day and age of climate awareness. So I asked Bob Brown this question, and he told me, 'Scientists found that Victoria's mountain ash forest were the most carbon-dense known on Earth. But they have not measured the very-similar Tasmanian forests. We are on to it! It is safe to say that the Tarkine is in the same league as the Amazon when it comes to carbon retention.'

**From what we've been seeing online you've been helping out protestors who are doing tree sits with gear that you've designed for big wall climbing. Can you tell us more about the nature of this involvement and the way that it has helped?**

The current aerial activist's handbook is the *Direct Action Manual* (3rd edition), by Earth First! Some of the techniques have been improved, notably survival in tree-sits during inclement weather (which occurs often in rainforests!). For example, Erik Hayward and I have provided patterning instructions for creating a more weatherproof cover for their traditional heavy bed-frame sits, and dozens have now been made by activists (you can see D4's open source design threads [here](#)). So basically, yes, I have been helping bring proven big-wall hanging-tent technology to the art of peaceful aerial activism. I have been in awe of watching practitioners of this art, who have taken it to a high level, incorporating safety and speed in setting up tree sits that would certainly be 5.12 (grade 25) if labelled with a climbing grade. My contribution has been to share big-wall portaledge technology, which perhaps, just as in climbing, might allow a wider margin of opportunity for planned adventures.

**More recently, you yourself went into the Sumac Forest and did a tree sit, can you tell us about the experience and what happened? How does doing a tree sit compare to a big wall?**

I am still processing this one. It was [wild](#). Really my recent tree sit was an opportunity to test one of my D4 portaledge designs in extreme weather. I wouldn't feel right about offering my tools to activists for wild weather unless I had tested it myself, as I have always done with each iteration of my single-point hanging survival tent designs, dating back to 1986 when I originally designed the first A5 stormproof portaledges for big-wall climbing. One thing I found quite different in a tree vs big wall, is that on a big wall, the wind generally hits the wall and shoots straight up vertically, so you get lifted up, but not out. In high winds on the Hambi tree (named in solidarity with activists trying to preserve the [Hambach Forest](#) in Germany) in the Sumac last week, I realised that the wind coming from behind the tree could have sent me flying like a kite outwards from the tree to the point where my ledge would be vertical. Luckily I had tied the frame corners to the tree directly – this has informed a new design feature to make this secondary attachment easier when used in trees.

**Some of the trees look very large, how do you get into the canopy without using spikes?**

That is the part of the art I mentioned earlier. Last weekend I attended one of Echo's Rope Rats sessions and learned a huge amount on how to set up and manoeuvre in a tree. It is quite an art. The main tool is the beanbag with attached throwline, which can be hand tossed or shot with the 'Bigshot', a kind of giant slingshot that tree climbers use. We recently acquired a [pneumatic throwline launcher](#), which is easier to use than a Bigshot for trees up to about 35m. From a high branch, the rest of the tree is accessed. I am still a bit shy about 'arbing' (moving safely upward from branch to branch) around the high branches, but I have been learning the theory anyway.



*Teaching the next generation about the power of protest; John and Rowen Middendorf. Photo by Tim Cooper/tcooperphoto.com*

**What kind of a kit do you need to have to do a tree sit?**

Glad you asked. That is one of the things that the Bob Brown Foundation is funding with a current crowd-funder. Here is a picture of the kit (see photo). I also put together a short [video](#). Having a fully self-sufficient lightweight kit will expand the abilities of activists.



### What are the chances of being arrested and what are the repercussions?

With any sort of activism it is a bit like being a big-water river guide: there are those who have flipped, and those who have yet to flip. I didn't get arrested on either of my last two tree sits in Tarkine, but it might just be a matter of time. When tree camping in the Tarkine wilderness, you can be arrested for 'trespass', which you usually think of illegal entry into private land. But these lands are public, and not only that, they are virgin wilderness, so it is hard to imagine how Forestry Tasmania [ed's note: Forestry Tasmania has now been rebranded as Sustainable Timbers Tasmania] considers it their 'right to exclusive possession of the land on which the trespass occurred', as trespass is often defined. Public wilderness should not be anyone's exclusive possession.

**The Liberal Hodgman government has recently tabled new anti-protest laws, their first attempt at similar laws were found to be unconstitutional by the High Court after action by Bob Brown. The draft laws released include penalties such as 18 months in jail for a first offence, while a second offence could attract a four-year term and a \$10,000 fine. If they're found to be constitutional, do you think that they would make you think twice about protesting?**

This changes the topic from an environmental one to a political one. The law is not actually new, but an amendment of a law that failed a few years ago. Most people see this attempt to create a draconian protest law, directed solely towards forest activists, as the sound and fury of a dying industry. The original Tasmanian law prompted Bob Brown to get arrested at his first opportunity, whereupon he challenged the law, resulting in the law being annulled as unconstitutional, as the existing trespass laws have proven to be constitutionally adequate. Forestry Tasmania is what is sometimes called a quasi-public enterprise. In Tasmania this means that they can do what they want, get funded by the government (they tend to somehow lose at least \$20 million a year even though their resource is free), but is financially opaque, meaning that transactions are considered 'commercial in confidence', which enables them to obscure the distribution of old-growth forest products (mostly woodchip). They are under a quota system so by law are pushed to clearfell the last remaining wilderness in order to get a few sawlogs. It's really a government enterprise run amok, as the general public strongly supports retaining as much as Tasmania's reputation for pristine environments, and clearly the destruction of Australia's largest remaining forest would be a blot on this reputation. They have spent millions on a campaign to brand themselves 'sustainable' and many people believe they are really not logging old-growth forests, so I think they do not really want a high profile court case, where the truth about their practices will be more exposed.

### **What can climbers do to help protect the Sumac Forest and takayna/Tarkine?**

Show up! There is lots of public support to help preserve these forests, and peaceful vigil camps require the skills of all. Climber's skills are in high demand, as the standard safe techniques used by aerial activists are easily learned by fit climbers.

### **If climbers are down in Tassie over the summer holidays, who should they contact about offering their skills?**

Really, just head to the Tarkine for a visit. If driving south from the ferry, take the route through Corinna – you will travel through some of the most spectacular landscapes on Earth. And stop by one of the Tarkine protest camps – they are generally easy to find—the current one is near the Sumac Lookout (also nearby is the [Kanunnah Bridge](#), which has a wonderful swim spot underneath). There will be a cup of tea waiting for you. Or you can contact the [Bob Brown Foundation](#) to find out more about the events in the Tarkine, they also organise public events like the Tarkine in Motion, an annual gathering of artists, or the Tarkine Bioblitz, which does citizen science in the area.

### **Where can people learn more about takayna/Tarkine?**

Patagonia did a beautiful film on the 2018 activism in takayna/Tarkine (see below). There are some amazing activists who have helped preserve these areas for the past decades, in both fair and foul weather, and it is easy to get involved through the [Bob Brown Foundation](#), which is working to preserve the Tarkine through public awareness, political pressure, and by supporting peaceful activism.

*See more of the incredible beauty of takayna on photographer Tim Cooper's [website](#).*

*Currently the Bob Brown Foundation is holding a [fundraiser](#) to help fund peaceful blockades in the wilder-*

*ness. Please support this Pozible campaign! \$1000 donations fully fund an Activist's tree kit, which will include a portaledge, waterproof haulbag, ropes and all the gear required to live in a tree. These will also be available to trained climbers who might want to help protest.*



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## One thought on “News – John Middendorf on the logging of takayna/Tarkine”

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Simon Mentz

February 6, 2020 at 3:55 pm

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A really great overview of the situation in the Tarkine. The film is also exceptional and utterly captivating. It has really helped me understand the full situation. Thanks for posting.