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# How Aerial Activists Are Protecting The Last Of Tasmania's Old Growth

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The wind lifted him up and slammed him down. Hail bounced off his rain fly, and lightning lit up the treetops under a dark sky. John Middendorf was riding the storm like a captain at sea. Except Middendorf was in his portaledge—a hanging cot of his design—100 feet off the ground in a 300-year-old eucalypt in Tasmania's Tarkine rainforest. It was just another night in an aerial blockade, facing harsh rainforest conditions while protesting the logging of old growth trees. And it also happened to be the perfect kind of stormy night for Middendorf to test his latest portaledge prototype.

Middendorf, an engineer living in Hobart, Tasmania, was the inventor of the first stormproof portaledge, which was originally produced in the 1980s for rock climbers in Yosemite Valley. His design, featuring a lightweight aluminum frame, heavy-duty nylon suspension straps and a taught canvas platform, provided little in the way of plush sleeping comfort, but it stood the test of time for its simplicity and durability. It became a great tool for protesters facing volatile weather in Tasmania's forests, too.



STEVE PEARCE / THE TREE PROJECTS

Australia's island state of Tasmania is home to about a half-million people and numerous wild animals including Tasmanian devils, wombats and giant freshwater lobsters. The forests there host abundant fungi—from the colorful to the cryptic. And the native trees are massive, with trunks over 10 feet in diameter. The island is covered in wilderness, but it might not be for long. The Tarkine, over a million acres of temperate rainforest in the northwest corner of the island, is under threat from Australia's logging industry. Middendorf said the native old growth trees in the Tarkine are being logged at an alarming rate, and he's worried the remaining unprotected old growth could be gone in a few decades. Some of the Tarkine's old growth trees are protected in areas like the Savage River National Park, but much of the Tarkine is unprotected and scheduled to be logged.

It's hard to do Tasmania's old growth justice with words. Standing beneath their flowering branches, feeling the moss-covered bark and

walking around their enormous trunks is a sensory experience. The forest smells like earth—fresh oxygen, spores floating through the air, sweet ferns and the oddly pleasant scent of wet dirt. The sounds are dynamic—birds singing, amphibians moving through pine needles on the forest floor, marsupials scavenging in the brush and wind rocking the trees.

The Tarkine is rich in Aboriginal heritage—it is a place of great spiritual and archeological significance for the Indigenous people in Tasmania.

The forest works around the clock—providing habitat for dozens of threatened species and storing an immense amount of the planet's carbon. But the Tarkine's remarkable ecosystem is in danger as logging operations move deep into the forest.

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STEVE PEARCE / THE TREE PROJECTS

Sustainable Timber Tasmania is the company logging the Tarkine, and their survival depends on subsidies from the government. The native logging business isn't a profitable one. But the industry employs enough Australians to incentivize politicians to keep Sustainable Timber Tasmania afloat. So the taxpayers pay tens of millions of dollars every year and the loggers keep working to meet the quotas specified in their

government contracts. Virgin trees are cut down then sold at a loss, and in many cases, they are merely shredded into wood chips. Middendorf said less than 10% is actually sawed into lumber.

In many places, trees are a sustainable resource. They can be harvested, used for building or fuel, then replaced by planting new trees. But these old growth trees—many of which are over 500 years old—are irreplaceable. And it's not just a few that are being taken down. Large quads of forest are cut at a time, leaving behind barren stump-strewn scars in the woods.

The consequences are grave. Clearcutting releases large amounts of **carbon** that would have otherwise been stored in the forest. And endangered species, like Tasmania's **swift parrot**, can be left without their habitats.

The primary organization trying to protect the Tarkine is the **Bob Brown Foundation**, led by former senator and Australian Green Party founder Dr. Bob Brown. On the frontline, backed by the foundation, are protesters putting their bodies between trees and machines to stop logging from proceeding. Middendorf contributes to these efforts by donating portaledge for protesters to use while they live in the canopies, preventing loggers from cutting the trees down. Middendorf occasionally gets up into the trees too, though he said he's not in the same league as the hard-core aerial activists that spend months living in portaledges at the mercy of terrible weather, facing off with chainsaw-wielding loggers.

Many protesters are charged with trespassing, even though the logging and protesting happen on public land. Middendorf said state laws give the quasi-public Sustainable Timber Tasmania power to evict people from the land they're logging on. When activists refuse to budge, police

arrest them.



STEVE PEARCE / THE TREE PROJECTS

Middendorf's **portaledge**s, branded D4 for his nickname "Deucey" and the 4 corners of the ledge, are just large enough to fit two humans sleeping side by side. They're designed with collapsible aluminum poles, which maintain the shape and rigidity of the nylon cot, and can break down and fold up so the whole thing can fit in a backpack. That's the main advantage of Middendorf's design over the other portaledge s on the market made by big climbing gear companies like **Black Diamond** and **Metolius**. Many of the other brands' ledge s weigh twice as much and pack down to double the size of the D4. These weight savings are key for the protesters because they hike for miles to reach logging sites.

Not everyone loves the D4 ledge though. Middendorf said some protesters think "nylon processed tech stuff" isn't in line with the environmental movement. Some prefer to build ledge s out of recycled bed frames and tarps. But Middendorf said the conditions are so rough

in the forest that the new portaledges technology is generally welcomed. “They are fighting senseless destroyers of rare wilderness ecosystems,” he said. “So it's worth using things of value even if not totally sustainable.”

Photos of activists in Middendorf's portaledges started making their way around the web, and threats soon followed. In May, the Facebook page [Support Tassie's Timber People](#) shared a photo of Middendorf and two other activists in a post that Middendorf said was defamatory. It inferred Middendorf profited off activists using his portaledges and suggested he supported a violent protest technique called tree-spiking (driving steel spikes into logs that can shatter saw blades and injure loggers and sawmill workers). Middendorf does sell portaledges on his [website](#), but he said he gives them to aerial activists for free. He also said he does not endorse violent action and made it clear that the activist community has denounced tree-spiking, and anyone supporting it would not be welcome to protest. The comments section ganged up on Middendorf and his peers. They were called “mongrel dogs,” “murderous tree huggers” and “stupid wankers.” Some comments were subtle death threats, like “they deserve a tree spike between their ears,” and “Vermin! What do U do with vermin??? Well U guess?”

Middendorf said much of the conflict is a result of the logging industry's lobbying efforts and misinformation campaigns, including Sustainable Timber Tasmania's new “sustainable” branding (the company was formerly called Forestry Tasmania). He said most Tasmanians care about the environment, but many believe the company isn't logging any old growth. In the comments on some of the pro-logging Facebook pages, critical citizens ask rhetorical questions like whether the activists know that their houses and clipboards are made out of trees. But logging trees isn't necessarily an issue. Logging native trees is.

The truth is hidden down long logging roads, blocked by locked gates. Sustainable Timber Tasmania is the gatekeeper. It's a secretive industry, so old growth logging happens with little oversight or accountability. The only thing that can stop it is an aerial blockade by activists willing to hike the roads, often over 10 miles, then climb up into the trees with equipment to survive in the canopies for long enough to disrupt the loggers' plans.

Activists staging aerial blockades work in teams. Protesters in the trees are called "possums." And those on the ground are the "wallabies," keeping eyes on the trees at all times to assist if anything goes wrong. They hike into the logging zone in the middle of the night, then they use a slingshot or similar device to launch a rope over a high branch to ascend the tree and haul up their gear.

Middendorf said the logging areas look like war zones. Everything in sight is destroyed. There's dust everywhere, and the peaceful sounds of the rainforest are replaced with the noises of heavy machinery and chainsaws ripping through wood.





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Protecting the Tarkine is about more than just preserving the trees. It's a complex ecosystem, Middendorf said in a video on his [YouTube](#) channel. "We don't know how to understand it today, but maybe our children will." He said there could be answers in the wilderness—maybe there's a fungus out there that could teach us how to cure devastating diseases. Nobody will ever know if the forest gets torn down now.

Looking out from his portaledge camp one morning, Middendorf marveled at the birds flying by, the wind rustling the leaves and the brilliant canopy of giant eucalypts. The forest is supposed to grow by its nature, but even still, there's less of it standing every day.

Middendorf and the other activists want protection for the Tarkine. But that will require the government to flip its current stance on logging. Until that happens, protesters will be up in the trees, trying to keep the forest alive for as long as they can.