

Portaledge Protesting In Tasmania by Joy Martin

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“They’re not like *those* trees,” said five-year-old Remi Middendorf, pointing at the young birches lining the hot springs. “They’re *special* trees.”

Her Australian accent with an adorable lisp made the word *special* sound extraspecial, like she knew it would call to mind exactly what she was describing: the eucalyptus trees in the Tarkine forests near her home in Tasmania. Ranging from three hundred to seven hundred years old, these gentle giants look like they could come to life and share all sorts of wisdom and tall tales.

by Joy Martin ([This story is published in Volume 13. Pick one up here.](#))

Their home is 1.2 million acres in the Tarkine, Australia’s largest remaining patch

of Gondwana rainforest, the second largest temperate rainforest in the world. Located in northwestern Tasmania, the Tarkine's old growth dates back to the age of the dinosaurs. The forest opens to the west where a collection of buttongrass moorland, cave systems, sand dunes, and coastal heath meets the Indian Ocean.

Below the eucalyptus, thirty-foot-high ferns fan across the forest floor. Fossilized pollen grains dating back 165 million years match the same kind of fossils found in Antarctica, Chile, and Madagascar, serving as strong evidence that these four continents were once connected, a land mass whimsically called Gondwanaland.



John Middendorf putting his time in for the cause in his own portaledge. Photo: Tim Cooper

With some of the purest air and water on the planet, the Tarkine is home to opossum and platypus, wombat and wallaby, and the inimitable Tasmanian devil. The wedge-tailed eagle, Australia's largest eagle, makes its nest here, too, while the world's largest freshwater invertebrate species, the blue-shelled crayfish, swims in the Tarkine's west-flowing rivers.

Besides serving as habitat for over sixty rare, threatened, and endangered species, the Tarkine also celebrates forty thousand years of aboriginal history. The

Tasmanian aborigines are believed to be the most southerly people to have survived the last ice age. Their archaeological sites include hut depressions, rock carvings, shell middens, and other remnants scattered throughout the Tarkine.

Between the abundance of natural beauty and its cultural significance, the area seems like a no-brainer for UNESCO World Heritage Site status. “To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria,” reads the UNESCO website. The Tarkine doesn’t meet just one but several of those ten.

While the campaign to protect the Tarkine’s pristine wilderness launched in the 1960s, there are still roughly 74,000 acres of native forests located in government-designated logging zones. There’s no distinction between logging younger trees or felling the really old trees, like those grandfatherly, *special* eucalyptus. This oversight makes Remi’s little lip quiver and her blue eyes widen in childlike disbelief.

“Guess what?” she more declared than asked. “When the trees fall, they shatter. And then they turn them into woodchips. What do woodchips make?”

I shrugged. Later, I learned that eucalyptus is actually the most common source for pulpwood used in papermaking, but it also makes dyes, oils, didgeridoos, and is even considered a way to locate subsurface mineral deposits (these trees sometimes have flecks of gold in them, drawn up through their root systems and deposited in leaves and branches). Special indeed.

“I’ll ask Dad,” said Remi. “Dad’s wise. You know how I know Dad’s wise? He’s sooooo oooooold.”

We sat on the ledge of a pool in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, where she’d journeyed with her family for an American Southwest climbing and cultural adventure. The impromptu soak session transpired when I recognized her dad, John Middendorf, whom I’d just met the day before back in Durango. He’d popped up to visit his friend and colleague, Barry Ward, who owns the Durango Sewing Company, the

shop helping John manufacture his latest portaledge design.

Before he became a father, John “Deucey” Middendorf spent the better part of the 1980s and ’90s climbing the big walls of Yosemite, Zion, and most famously, the Great Trango Tower in Karakoram, Pakistan, in 1992. He and his partner, Xaver Bongard, were the first to climb the notorious big wall and, more importantly, make it home safely.

Eight years before Middendorf and Bongard’s attempt, a team of Norwegians were not so lucky and, after summiting, died on the descent of the East Face, which is considered the world’s tallest cliff with a nearly vertical 4,500-foot drop from the 20,623-foot-high summit. John and Xaver’s route ran parallel to the Norwegians. Their success was due in part to John’s expertly engineered portaledge design constructed by his big wall gear company, A5 Adventures.

In 1997, John sold the original A5 designs and IP to the North Face, where he worked as a senior product manager until 1999. He moved to Australia in 2003 and put his engineering degree from Stanford to use teaching high school math and science.

Environmental activism had been an undercurrent in John’s life since the late 1990s, when he battled to protect Yosemite’s Camp 4 from development. The fight was won officially in 2003 with Camp 4 receiving status on the National Register of Historic Places. In Tasmania, his activism has focused mainly on saving the Tarkine.

Back on the pool ledge, Remi asked how I knew John (she flipped between calling her father John and Dad). When I told her I was writing a story about him, she was incredulous. Why? Well, your dad works hard to save the trees in the forests near your home, I told her. I added that her brother, Rowen, was going to be in the story too.

“What about me?” she asked, blue eyes popping out of her blond-framed face.

John sat on the opposite ledge, smiling contentedly while his budding activist spoke her piece. She said she wanted to save the trees because Rowen saves the trees. Inspired by his father, eleven-year-old Rowen has been dabbling in aerial protests. Also known as tree sitters, aerial protesters set up platforms well off the ground and sit in the treetops, hoping to deter contractors from felling human-occupied trees. Remi told me John had forgotten her harness; otherwise she would have been up there with them.

The idea behind tree sits is to stall logging practices in wilderness areas long enough for government bills to pass or, at the very least, long enough for the police (and, ultimately, the media) to show up. Tree sitters, like all environmental activists, believe that the more people that are aware of endangered wilderness and wildlife, the greater the chances of preserving these special regions.

While it might be a few years before Remi takes her activism to new heights, the precocious five-year-old does her part during ground-based protests at gatherings like the Grey Nomads Picnic. This group of tan, happy Taswegians recently laid out a tablecloth and some tea in the middle of a coupe, forcing the loggers to cease work for the rest of the day.

Remi has plenty of time to learn the climbing skills required for tree sitting, like jumaring and rigging ropes. Meanwhile, her time is better spent going to school, especially considering tree sitters sometimes live in trees anywhere from days to years until their mission is completed.

For example, one of history's most famous tree sitters, Julia Butterfly Hill, lived in a 180-foot-tall 1,500-year-old redwood tree nonstop between December 1997 and December 1999. She called her tree Luna and refused to descend until the Pacific Lumber Co. arranged to preserve Luna and any tree within a two-hundred-foot radius. Two years later, the standoff, er, sit off, worked. She writes about the adventure in her memoir, *The Legacy of Luna*.



Kai Wild in a portaledge while visiting Bob Brown Foundation's vigil camp at Frankland River, Tarkine. Photo: Steven Pearce

Former platforms, like the one Hill probably used, are far from easy to sneak into the coupes where loggers are staged. That's where John's engineering expertise comes in.

After a twenty-year hiatus from constructing big wall gear, John is back on the scene with his 2017 D4 Ledge Series. The D4 has been praised as the most innovative creation in big wall gear since John's A5 storm-proof portaledge, meeting demands for big wall climbers and modern-day tree sitters alike—both motivated to move quickly.

Environmental activist Erik Hayward has spent the last two years living in trees throughout the Tarkine. He's here because of the "true wildness" of Tasmania, where Erik said, "you can walk west for weeks and never see a soul." When he's not perched in the canopy, he guides visitors from near and far, inspiring them to appreciate the unequivocal grandeur of the island state. Erik explains the benefits of John's invention:

“Light and quick to pop up, watertight and that pack down small, they are an extraordinary development in comparison to the age-old grassroots activist platform we are transitioning away from: a bed frame, plywood and bush pole for ridge pole to hang a cheap tarp over during the rain...thirty kilograms of awkward bulk that’s like a sail in the wind.”

“Working closely with the Ledge(end) John, we are able to try out different flies, sizes of ledge and frame types,” says Erik. “It’s something that can revolutionise a movement of aerial blockading.”

With John’s collapsible D4, walking ten miles into the Tasmanian bush is one less challenge for protesters to face, but there are plenty of other trials to keep the tree sitters on their toes—especially in the Tarkine, nestled at forty-two degrees below the equator. With the flopped seasons, winter has just hit the forest like a gut punch.

“The Roaring Forties thrash the trees, squalls tear through the valleys with relentless buckets of ice-cold rain, snow falls, creeks and rivers burst, the gales gust through the thick ancient branches,” Erik says.

“On the days where it’s sunny, up in the canopy, we are away from the flies that torment the ground crew,” he adds optimistically. “It’s shaded with a cool breeze, can be an incredible place to lose yourself watching the stars at night from just that little bit closer, or the endangered wedge-tailed eagle soaring during the day.”

Ground crews resupply tree sitters with food, and water is collected from nearby streams. When the police come to chase them away, the tree sitters pack up, and, under the cover of darkness, wait to strike another logger coupe in an endless game of cat and mouse.

“Every day we occupy this forest is a day that the chainsaws do not come in,” says Erik. “I will continue being a thorn behind the scenes for the love of the rose. We will not give up on this place. We will not move.”

While the tree sitters keep loggers and law enforcement busy on the frontlines, the battle to turn the Tarkine into a national park is strong where it matters most: in court. The political campaign is spearheaded by former Australian senator and family doctor Bob Brown and his team at the Bob Brown Foundation.

The foundation's stance on the Tarkine is that, instead of logging old-growth forests, which is more ideological than profitable, resources could be shifted to growing the Tarkine's tourism industry, one that national park status would certainly encourage.

“National park legislation is very strong in Australia,” says Jenny Weber, campaign manager for the Bob Brown Foundation. “It is the lack of political will to make the Tarkine a national park that is a problem. The solution to making the Tarkine a World Heritage-listed national park is activating the democratic push by citizens to the politicians that they will be voted into power if they commit to a national park.”

“In an age of dramatic climate change, leaving the natural forests on the planet in their natural intact state is essential,” she adds.

Thanks to the efforts of Jenny, Bob, Erik, John, Rowen, and even little Remi, the Tarkine is about to recruit a fresh batch of cheerleaders. This June, Patagonia Films will release a documentary about the fight for the Tarkine. Told through the experiences of a Taswegian trail-running doctor and the conflicting narratives of aboriginal communities, activists, and politicians, the film shines light on the bigger picture of modern conservation and the importance of protecting the planet's last true wild places.

With budding activists like Rowen and Remi wrapped into the action, the adults can't help but be hopeful. I asked Rowen why he fights to save the forests. His brow grew grave beyond his years. He pondered for a moment.

“Because fifty years from now...” he started to say, his eyes drifting to the future. But the eleven-year-old changed his mind and instead asked simply, “What about

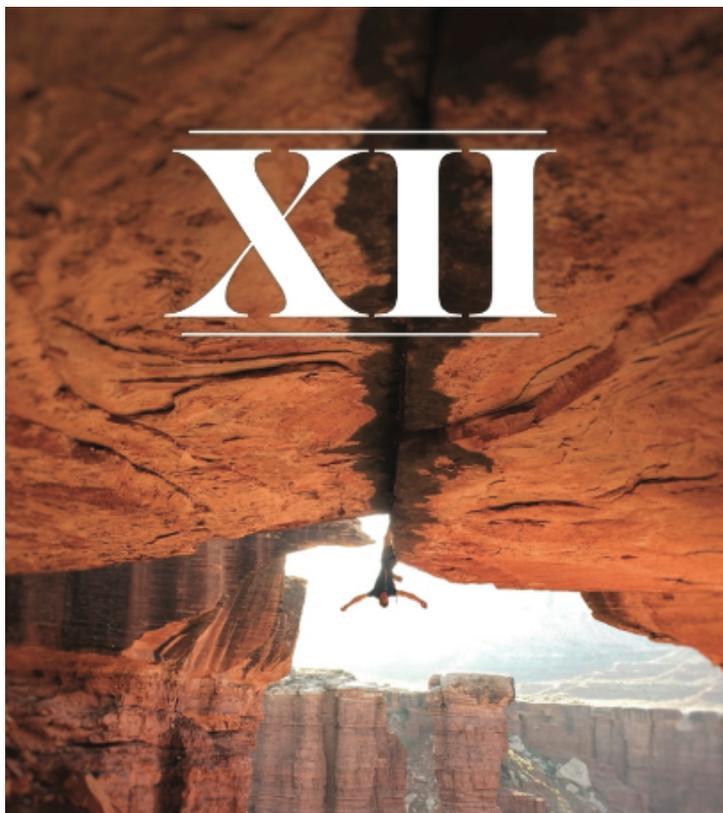
my children?"

Basecamped in Durango, Colorado, Joy Martin survives as a freelance writer who occasionally guides, ski instructs, delivers flowers, and whatever else it takes to maximize time outside. She's partial to road trips, alpenglow, Nick Martin, and Jameson on the rocks. More about Joy on www.joydotdot.com.

[Watch the film, Takayna / Tarkine by Patagonia Films, which was just released.](#)

[Patagonia's page: Takayna \(What if running could save a rainforest.\)](#)

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