

# ATB#480FloweringGiantsPODCAST

Tue, 11/23 2:38PM 28:19

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

forest, trees, ash trees, mountain, central highlands, kath, fbi, community, kilometre, logging, hollow, people, melbourne, possum, years, metres, week, world, giant, walk

## SPEAKERS

Sarah Reece, Danni Stewart, Helenna Barone-Peters, Evan, Jordan Crook, Evana, Mell Chun, David Lindenmeyer

---

### H Helenna Barone-Peters 00:04

You're listening to all the best. I'm Helenna Barone-Peters. There's a forest behind the house I grew up in, which I used to love playing in as a kid. It was pretty hilly, so it made for a popular spot amongst mountain bikers and bmx riders. I never had the courage to take it up, until my dad decided to take me down one of the most treacherous trails on a tag-along bike. There I was 6 years old bouncing along behind him having the time of my life. Miraculously nothing went wrong, the bottom of the trail opened out onto a huge field, teeming with butterflies. It was one of the most beautiful places I'd ever seen. So when the council announced plans to redevelop the area with a new highway I was devastated. Later that week, the community hall was packed with people rallying against it. For the most part I had no idea what was going on, all I knew was that I didn't want the highway. But thanks to a few very dedicated individuals, to this day that forest remains untouched. After a successful match on Hinge, Evan began spending a lot of time in the central highlands, and fell in love with the giant flowering gum trees. In our next story, he talks to some of the people who have dedicated their lives to understanding and protecting these forests.

### E Evan 01:45

The central highlands form a triangle from Kinglake to Elden and then down to Bologna in Eastern Victoria on Gunaikurnai, Taungurung, Wurundjeri lands. With perfect elevations and heavy rainfall. The central highlands is Goldilocks country for the mountain ash. It's this part of the world that I've had the pleasure to get to know in 2021 a year which started with a month in Warburton. Warburton is a little over an hour east from Melbourne CBD, inhaling and exhaling on arrival, you feel immediately healthier with the forest and mist that envelops the mountains over Birrarung or what you might know as the Yarra River. After a month alongside the striking King parrots and crimson rosellas thought my time here would be brief. But it's fair to say that this plan was turned on its head. Somewhere at the end of last year, driving down the coast back to Melbourne, I matched with and started chatting to Kath. I didn't know a lot about her other than she was a vet with a great smile, a love of the outdoors, a super turn of phrase and a resident of Healesville just down the road from Warburton. Not too long after I arrived in the central highlands she materialised from behind the app, and now teases me for spending more time in Healesville with her than the city in 2021, a year where metropolitan Melbourne which includes Healesville took the title for the city with the world's longest lockdown. This part of the world has become part of my home and the mountain ash trees loom large. Every week, I've ventured into some part of the forest nickelsville trying to tap into a

sense of calm and a different sense of time these trees create. I don't take big things for granted. Especially not the mountain ash trees. They tower over everything else. With a growth rate of up to a metre a year. They sprout with an incredible haste for as much sunlight as they can absorb. I really wanted to get to know these soothing trees intimately, and capture what gives them the uplifting quality. But to untrained eyes like mine that can be difficult to describe. So I've enlisted the help of a few people who have made it their life to understand, celebrate and protect this special forest.

D

David Lindenmeyer 04:11

I'm passionate about forests, passionate about Australian wildlife and passionate about conservation.

E

Evan 04:17

That's Professor David Lindenmeyer, a professor of ecology at the Australian National University in Canberra. David is recognised as the world's leading expert on the mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands.

D

David Lindenmeyer 04:32

Gosh, mountain ash trees would have to be some of the most stunning trees on the planet. So when you see a mountain ash tree, you see this incredibly tall, smooth bark eucalypt and then it's got a kind of sock at the bottom around the base of the tree almost like a stocking and the thing that's really quite remarkable about these extraordinary trees is that there's such a little canopy tiny little canopy for such a monumentally large tree so that really beautiful trunk interesting stocking of sort of dense fissured bark and then a tiny little canopy at the top. And then in really big trees what happens is that mountain ash trees shed their skin every year so it's the bark that gets shed as the tree grows much like a snake sheds its skin every year.

E

Evan 05:15

As evocative as David's description is nothing quite beats going out into the forests and taking a look at these flowering giants for yourself. I met Jordan Crook a nature campaigner for the Victorian national parks association in the Toolang State Forest, home to some of the tallest mountain ash trees on mainland Australia.

J

Jordan Crook 05:39

Here in Australia, we've got some of the most amazing plants and animal species on the face of the earth and really passionate about protecting those species and habitats for future generations and for the species themselves. And we're here underneath the Colatha Giant on Taungurung country in Toolang.

E

Evan 05:57

The Colatha Giant is one of the most spectacular in Toolang state forest. It's about 65 metres tall, the same height as the Sydney Opera House.

**J** Jordan Crook 06:07

And you see by the younger trees around it, that they're all competing for light, and that's what pushes them to get so tall and they shed those lower limbs as quick as possible, because they can't get the light to them to photosynthesize and keep living. So yeah, the first branch on the Culatta giant, probably about 15 metres or so up. And it's kind of won the race of all the trees around it. So it's this got up, it's not competing. It's more about putting on girth and height now and really flowering a lot more than the younger trees and it's kind of won the race and it's in retirement and just kicking back and relaxing.

**E** Evan 06:47

Another person who is equally transfixed by this beautiful tree is Sarah Reece.

**S** Sarah Reece 06:53

I'm a local from the Yarra Valley. And I've been living in that region for 20 years. And I have an immense passion for the giant mountain ash trees and the forest that's beneath them. And I have followed that passion since I first discovered them, and that would have been 1999.

**E** Evan 07:14

Sarah is also one of the driving forces behind the Great Forest National Park campaign, here's her take on the Culatta giant.

**S** Sarah Reece 07:25

It's just like, wow, these are still alive, they're 350, 450 years old, and still flowering. And if you've been to the Colatha Giant if you can get inside that tree stand up and have a look. And you can see the the sun or the stars from within it. And it's still alive very much alive and used by wildlife. So these are trees that continue on for a long time before they actually become soil. Again, my first experience with them reminded me of walking amongst the dinosaurs because they are so old. They're so large and it's still living.

**E** Evan 08:01

On colder days, clouds hang low, and the forest. Well it's like a Jurassic landscape. Walking through I feel transported into another world where everything in the central highlands is ancient and alive. What also stands out is how embedded these trees are within the entire ecosystem. According to David, it's a complex, interconnected web that enables the mountain ash forests to be home to species such as to threatened greater glider. It's also the last remaining habitat for the endangered ledbeaders possum and the helmeted Honeyeater Victorias is to faunal emblems.



D

David Lindenmeyer 08:41

But there are other really really intimate interrelationships between the forest and the animals in these systems. A good example is the mountain brushtail possum, which is a close relative of the common brushtail possum which is an animal that comes in and eats the vegetables in your garden, and your fruit trees. But the mountain brushtail possum is a deep wet forest animal, a lot of its time is spent eating fungi, including truffles. And those truffles grow on the roots of eucalypt trees and fix nutrients and help the trees to grow the truffles can't move through the forest without first passing through the gut of a possum or a native bush rat. And so really the way the forest works then is that the forest is not just a bunch of trees, it's actually also the relationships between the trees and the fungi and the soils and the animals and the forest simply doesn't function without these intimate interconnections.

E

Evan 09:35

This year, that ecosystem became a bit too familiar. It was Anzac Day, and I was battling a nasty non COVID virus. Despite struggling to walk down the street that morning, I'd convince myself and Kath that I was up to the challenge of climbing Mount Juliet. A mountain just outside of Healesville. This is no easy hike its over one kilometre above sea level, with an 800 metre climb in just three kilometres. I've heard it's one of the steepest in Victoria. It was hard going, and I struggled badly, pausing, wincing and wheezing along the way. When we eventually reached the summit, there was a dangerous combination of relief jubilation and distraction. We left late in the afternoon, with two hours of walking to go and less than two hours of sunlight remaining. What could possibly go wrong? It turns out when you walk off the path and veer off track, the answer is quite a lot. One of the first clues that we had left the track were how the trees and ferns had been left to run completely wild. It was the deepest into a forest that I'd ever ventured, and it was overwhelming. Against the towering mountain ash trees, masses of ferns and a GPS running around helplessly. I felt tiny. We were completely underprepared for a night walk, no head torch, or water consumed on the ascent, and no thermal clothing. shivering like a Chihuahua, our saving grace was phone reception. We call triple zero were confused operator tried to make sense of our coordinates. It was a three kilometre uphill hike for the cops. And I'll never forget the one who said it was the most exercise he had done in 10 years. By the time they arrived, I was a shivering wreck, operating on adrenaline alone, and as sheepish as we were feeling being escorted by four police officers down a mountain including a ride in a dimmy van one kilometre along the fire trail. It's sure beat an evening overnight on the mountain. Looking back on it all, it was a real turning point with Kath who could reasonably blame me but didn't for putting up my hand for a challenging hike while in shoddy health and with the forest. At that moment, I felt an incredible amount of trust, care and love for one another. As we went through a precarious situation. It's a feeling that's kept repeating itself since and it's especially strong every time we take off for a hike together. On that day, a new connection with the mountain ash forest and the Central Highlands was born. Until then, I'd never realised how wild this part of Victoria is. This was something I would expect in much more remote territory, far away from Melbourne, here on the doorstep is an incredible collision of different worlds, and ever stretching suburbia against the pocket of nature that launches a forest highway up to Cairns, these two worlds, the one where we consume, buy and build the other way nature is just left to be contrast starkly. It's this tension that provides some of the greatest threats and opportunities for the mountain ash trees. One of these worlds is mostly unaware of the other

S

Sarah Reece 13:05

I'm not subscribing to conspiracy. But if you don't want people to see what's happening, you don't celebrate a region.

E

Evan 13:11

Like Sarah, I'd also wondered why such little effort was put into promoting this part of the country.

S

Sarah Reece 13:17

I think a lot of the energy has really been put into celebrating regions that are now tourism friendly rather than trying to bring tourists into this area which is sort of treated as an industrial fibre crop. And I know it's a very brutal thing to say. But for a long time, the government's been allowed to do this without prying eyes, which means it hasn't become controversial. So it's a way of avoiding controversy. But by the same token the thrilling aspect of this is that guess what it exists and guess what? They're still standing you can still get to these places and and have these experiences and there's no limits. So despite the fact that there are many areas now logged, there are many areas that are still intact and worthy of our push for the Great Forest National Park.

E

Evan 13:59

The Great Forest National Park is a proposal that would provide ultimate protection to the native forests that still sit in the central highlands through an uninterrupted National Park, adding an extra 355,000 hectares. Jordan crook from the VMPA believes that the need for protection is very real,

J

Jordan Crook 14:19

like the mountain ash trees, the older they get. And we've got most of the trees around here 80 years old, and they take over 120 years the form hollows so we're closer to having forests full of hollows than not and we log them, we lose that we go back to square one. And the hollows are vital for quite a lot of species.

E

Evan 14:43

We're really talking about the need for a conservation protection strategy that gives the mountain ash trees the time they need to hollow out in the way to support the wildlife that you've just talked about.

J

Jordan Crook 14:57

Yeah, absolutely. And like every hollow bearing tree in the landscape should should be protected. No doubt any. Any threatening process, be it a road widening or logging or fuel reduction work should avoid hollow bearing trees at all costs. Once they gone, they gone. A lot of the trees around them are too young to have the hollows. So, where do the animals go in that meantime, they can't wait sitting around twiddling their thumbs for 120 years waiting. We've got to protect the hollow bearing trees that already exist.

E

Evan 15:36

It's staggering to think about the threats that these mountain ash trees are facing. Victoria is the most cleared state in the country. with over 60% of native vegetation destroyed. And even though the state

government has committed to ending logging of native forest by 2030, it's a long time that can yield a lot of damage. This combination of logging, fires, a lack of protection and climate change has meant that the mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands have been classified as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. For David Lindenmeyer, the possibility of complete collapse is a deep concern.

D

David Lindenmeyer 16:18

The mountain ash ecosystem is in danger of ecological collapse. The reason for that is that there's such little old forest left and the young forest which dominates the landscape is very flammable, and in the event of yet more fires on top of what we've had in 2009. And actually, even in the last black summer fires as well, some of the Central Highlands burnt. The risk is that when the forest re burns, the trees will be too young and won't produce enough viable seed to be able to continue to persist. That is that they're not old enough to produce viable seed crops, which means that there aren't any germinates which means that the forest thing doesn't regenerate after fire like it has done for the last 20 million years. So the danger becomes then that mountain ash will be lost and replaced by wattles and other plants but we'll lose the dominant tree species, which is where most of the carbon storage is, which is where almost all of the tree hollows are where most of the water supply comes from.

E

Evan 17:21

We have in the immediate vicinity of Melbourne, one of the world's most unique and wonderful trees. Sadly, so many mountain ash trees aren't protected with many that aren't ending up as pulp, thanks to a 1938 contract with the Maryvale mill, committing the Victorian Government to supply native timber until 2030. I find it heartbreaking to think that these trees, which have been such a calming steady and wonderful presence in a lockdown year, are bound to meet such a fate. The prospect of the magical mountain ash being lost is something we should rally against. With only 1% of old growth forest remaining. This is our last chance to rethink how we treat these magnificent trees. Sarah Reese thinks if we're smart, they'll play a role as Melbourne heals from what feels like years of lockdown.

S

Sarah Reece 18:17

We are gonna have to invigorate Melbourne, we're going to have to help people heal, there is going to be a legitimate trauma that's going to come from lockdown. And nature has a wonderful it's speaks a language to everyone has a language for everyone and speaks to everyone. These places, particularly the great forests, these places will help people heal. And if premier Andrews and others want to celebrate both our city and put it back on on its feet, then announcing and launching a national park is a really great way to do that.

E

Evan 18:48

If we're even smarter, we'll realise that it's our responsibility to stand up for these trees, which is what Jordan Crook wants you to do.

J

Jordan Crook 18:57

This is public land, you make the call on how they're managed and how they're looked after. You can come in here and look at the trees and they kind of speak for themselves. There's there's not enough words in a dictionary to describe how amazing a big old mountain ash tree is and the amount of life that is in it and around it and the ecosystem that it creates. But guess the most important thing is that these are your forests. And in the coming few years, we have huge potential to let these forests grow old and in our lifetimes have older growth forests. So most of them 80 years. They're closer to being all growth than not all growth. So there's a potential there to really achieve something amazing. But people gotta raise their voices with their elected officials know we want the forest protected. I want native forest logging to be phased out quicker and that will benefit everybody

E

Evan 20:04

When it comes to the environment, second chances are rare. But with the mountain ash trees, we have a slim one. About 1/3 of the mountain ash forest in the central highlands is already 80 years old. Which means that in many of our lifetimes we'll live to a point where they'll start to hollow out and begin to transform their surrounds. Over the years, these trees have given us about everything they can to create towns, economies and jobs. But now we have the opportunity to say thank you and restore an ecosystem that's already helping us to restore how we relate to nature. And if we're lucky, one another. I never thought that a tree would come to define my sense of home. But in a world where everything has been turned on its head, the mountain ash tree has completely blurred the city wilderness divide that existed in my mind. They've inspired me with new ideas, and they've helped tremendously as life returns to a smaller scale. Melbourne's now been out of lockdown for almost a month. And even though we're allowed to venture much further afield, Kath and I are still regularly venturing into the mountain ash forests. We even managed to climb Mount Juliet again without getting lost. With flowering giants on our doorstep, it's time to let them bloom.

H

Helenna Barone-Peters 22:17

You've been listening to All The Best (On FBi Radio 94.5). I'm Helenna Barone-Peters. At All The Best, you can learn how to make audio documentaries, essays and fiction. If you have a story to tell, get in touch. Visit All The Best radio dot com and send us your pitch. We'll pair you with one of our supervising producers to help make your story. (All The Best's home station) FBi Radio is currently running our yearly Radiothon. As a community station, FBi relies on listener support and an incredible team of volunteers to make what we do possible. This week, we're reaching out to all our listeners who are interested in supporting. You can sign up to be a supporter at fbi radio dot com forward slash support. As a FBi Radio Supporter you'll be eligible to win giveaways like vinyl, movie tickets, gigs are more every single week. Plus if you sign up by November 19th you'll go in the draw to win one of our 5 Radiothon major prizes which include a years worth of beer from young henrys and a year of coffee from Single O. 16:18 Community radio is a really important platform for supporting emerging producers - this is what community radio means for the All The Best teeeeeeeam.

M

Mell Chun 24:04

I started out volunteering at Edge Radio in Hobart many years ago, my good friend Alex and I had a local news commentary show that we poured our hearts into. One week we drove for five hours up to a protest against logging in the Lapoinya forest. We wanted to interview Dr. Lisa Searle the problem was she was 20 metres up a eucalyptus tree and she planned to spend the next two weeks there as an act of resistance

against Forestry Tasmania. I put a list of questions and a Zoom recorder in a bucket. And we winched it 20 metres up that tree to get that interview. That was a lot of years ago. And I've been in love with community radio ever since.

E

Evana 24:46

Through community radio, I've been afforded the opportunity to talk to authors and artists I would otherwise never have gotten the chance to. I've met people from all walks of life. Made good friends, and collaborated with and guided emerging audio storytellers through the process of making some really fantastic stories.

H

Helenna Barone-Peters 25:08

FBI has been a huge part of my life and has meant so much to me. It's an amazing community of volunteers and has opened me up to so many opportunities, starting off behind the desk to working in the Music Library to being accepted into present training and presenting on the all nighters programme, to being here hosting All The Best.

D

Danni Stewart 25:29

I've met some of the most amazing hard working people around. So many volunteers at the station put in hours upon hours of work into their shows every single week, just because we really care about our listeners and making great content for you.

M

Mell Chun 25:49

The amount of time and pride I've seen volunteers put into their work is amazing. It is such a supportive and energised community.

H

Helenna Barone-Peters 25:57

Through my time and FBI, I've met some of the most inspiring and dedicated people I know who all work tirelessly to amplify Sydney's independent music and art scene.

M

Mell Chun 26:08

community radio stations rely on listener support to keep running.

E

Evana 26:13

If you believe in the arts, and in providing diverse people with a platform and space for learning, you should support community radio.

D

Danni Stewart 26:21

Plus, if you sign up, you'll be eligible for some pretty sick giveaways every week and who doesn't love a good giveaway?

H

Helenna Barone-Peters 26:32

To support fbi sign up at [fbi radio dot com forward slash support](http://fbi-radio.com/forward/slash/support). All The Best would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we make these stories, and pay our respects to elders past and present. All The Best is made at FBi Radio on Gadigal Land, in association with SYN and 3RRR, on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung Lands and 8CCC on Arrernte and Warumungu Lands. Our Editorial Manager is Mell Chun, and our Production Manager is Danni Stewart. Emma Pham is our Social Media Producer, our Community and Events Coordinator is Lidiya Josifova. And Wing Kuang is the All The Best mentee producer. Shining Bird composed our theme music and Annie Hamilton designed the artwork. Weâ€™re heard across Australia on the Community Radio Network. And weâ€™re made possible by the Community Broadcasting Foundation. You can find out more at [C B F dot org dot AU](http://CBF.org.au). You can find more episodes by searching for All The Best wherever you get your podcasts. Iâ€™m Helenna Barone-Peters. Thanks for listening.