

**Submission  
No 160**

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT CONSENTS IN NSW**

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We had two flashlights among the four of us and were looking for two tiny reflections in the darkness: eyes. Eyes of yellow-bellied gliders. Tony, one of our party, demonstrated their call to me before we walked into the forest. Puffing his chest out, he uttered a thin but enduring screech that made me jump, surprised that this ear-piercing sound had come from such a gruff, stoic man. He followed that up with a recording of the real thing. Impressively similar.

In solemn silence, I followed Tony and the others into a corridor between shadowy trunks that leaned in as we entered, whispering to each other at the entry of their latest visitors. I hoped the forest knew we were friends. Sharing one of the two flashlights with me was my friend Jacob, who lived close by and had grown up exploring the bush we now tiptoed through. Where I walked with uncertain steps and fresh eyes, he strode with the confidence of one deeply familiar with the land and deeply connected to it. It was Jacob who had invited me here tonight.

When Jacob had asked me to go "spotlighting", I initially imagined running gleefully around the bush, with the thrill of darkness, playing a nostalgic game of hide and seek with a bunch of mates. Instead, to my pleasant surprise, spotlighting meant creeping through the Tura Forest with Tony, and Jacob's mother Elizabeth, searching for the tiny eyes of yellow-bellied gliders with thin beams of light.

The Yellow-bellied Glider (*Petaurus australis*) is an endangered nocturnal, arboreal marsupial native to eastern Australia. Their characteristics include a distinctive yellowish belly, dark dorsal stripe, and a membrane between their fore and hind limbs, which gives them the ability to glide between trees. These petite animals have a body length of 27-30 cm, extended by a long winding tail that can measure up to 48 cm. Their diet includes a selection of tree sap, nectar, pollen and insects. They make their homes in tall eucalypt forests and woodlands, relying on large, mature trees for food and shelter. These trees are specific as they must produce the sap the gliders feed on and have hollows for daytime snoozing.

Our footsteps echoed softly against the forest floor, voices hushed in reverence for the enveloping natural world. On either side of the track we followed, the bush expanded out, feeling infinite in the darkness. As the flashlights swept from tree to tree, glimpses of the complex ecological wonderland- sweet, tangy eucalyptus, golden wattle blooms, and a leafy carpet- flashed before us. Even in the darkness it was spectacular. Sublime.

"Look here", whispered Jacob, and he led me to a construction fence, harsh and sterile amongst the soft beauty of the forest. This fence had been carelessly dumped on a clump of bushes that flowered with creamy clusters of star shaped flowers. He knelt with unconcealed grief, tenderly moving what he could from the fences steely chokehold. "This is the Starhair."

The Merimbula Star-Hair (*Astrotricha* sp. Wallagaraugh) is a rare and endangered plant species found in the Merimbula area of New South Wales, Australia. It is a shrub that can grow up to 2 meters tall and is characterized by its star-shaped hairs on the stems and leaves, giving the plant a distinctive

texture. This plant is endemic to a very restricted area around Merimbula, including the Tura Forest and the nearby Wallagaraugh area in NSW. It is listed as endangered due to its limited distribution and the ongoing threats to its habitat. These threats include land clearing for development and environmental changes such as increased fire frequency. Like many native plants, the Star-Hair plays an essential role in its ecosystem by providing habitat and food for local wildlife, including insects and small animals.

For two hours, we wove through the woods, our search for the elusive gliders interspersed with moments of silent admiration at the forest's sublime beauty. Elizabeth and Tony, seasoned ecologists dedicated to documenting and conserving the flora and fauna of this forest, led the way. They had devoted years to this ecosystem, painstakingly documenting the movements of its inhabitants. Passion and duty was evident in their every step, eyes keenly scanning the surroundings for any sign of life. At one point, our solemn expedition was unexpectedly interrupted by the arrival of a friend, Gabe, who hadn't got the memo that this version of "spotlighting" was not a game of hide-and-seek. For twenty minutes, he silently trailed behind us, blending seamlessly into the darkness, before leaping out from the bushes, screaming. The startled wildlife scattered, and we exchanged startled glances before bursting into relieved laughter.

Ironically, it was Gabe who eventually spotted a glider, his earlier antics forgotten as we marveled at the sight of this elusive creature perched on the branch of a beautiful eucalypt, its eyes bright with reflection and curiosity. In that moment, a part of me left my possession and was transferred to the earth beneath my feet, the tremendous trees that enveloped me and the little animal that had graced us with its presence. I felt a profound sense of duty and energy flicker. This forest must be protected.

The fence that crushed the star hair was erected because this forest was about to be destroyed, and in its place, 30 expensive copy paste McMansions would be built. This forest was facing a nightmare like threat. A Zombie development application, crawling from its archived grave to terrorize the small sleepy forest.

A "Zombie" or "Legacy" development approval (DA) refers to inactive or stagnant development proposals that have remained on the books for extended periods without being formally withdrawn or rejected. These approvals, which adhere to outdated environmental assessment regulations, are being revived by the NSW Liberal-National government, allowing developers to bulldoze thousands of hectares of ecologically rich bushland. This bushland, particularly vital as refuge for threatened species after the Black Summer fires, faces destruction from these developments, which also pose risks by being planned in floodplains, wetlands, and high bushfire risk areas. Despite claims of addressing the housing crisis, these developments primarily benefit developers at the expense of local communities and wildlife, often targeting areas where existing housing is underutilized. Communities are fighting back, striving to protect their coastal villages and natural heritage from irreversible damage.