

# Belanglo State Forest



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Do we all have the same pasts? If not, do we all exist in the same present?

The Belanglo State Forest is a non-native pine plantation surrounded by natural forest. It lies an hour and a half south of Sydney, just west-southwest of Bowral. The first introduced trees, radiata pines, were planted in 1919 (Primary Industries, 2012). I feel it's common knowledge but just in case you weren't aware, Ivan Milat is serving seven life sentences and another 18 years after being found guilty of killing seven hitchhikers and dumping their bodies in the Belanglo State Forest (Kennedy and Whittaker, 2001). Belanglo is synonymous with Milat and with misadventure at large.

But beyond that dominant reading, Belanglo is a sensual portal back home for Polish and other Eastern European migrants in autumn and yet another stain on our European-Australian flag.

## 1. Dumping Ground.

Belanglo State Forest is where people go to hide the bodies of hitchhikers they kill. Ask anyone. Tell someone you're hitchhiking and they'll say you'll end up at Belanglo.

Ron Fry picked me up just past seven in the morning, driving a white ute and wearing an orange hi-vis jacket.

"Jesus, Ron!" said a voice over mobile phone loudspeaker. Ron had opened the door to the car and announced that he had just stopped for a hitchhiker. "He's going to kill you."

"Not I'm not," I replied. The three of us laughed, and my total physical contact with Ron amounted to one handshake at our meeting and one again at our parting.

Unlike at least seven hitchhikers before me, I didn't end up bloody and lifeless, buried under a blanket of pine needles in Belanglo.

I was in Melbourne for a conference and I needed a story for my journalism subject at university. The body of a woman was found in the Belanglo State Forest. It was on the news, late August, 2010 (SMH, 2010). Another was found soon after, axed in the back of the head by a great nephew of Ivan Milat. I hitchhiked home to Sydney so I could talk to people who pick up hitchhikers, about picking me up and about Ivan Milat. It would be the first time I passed Belanglo since 1993 or 1994, depending on which of my parents you ask.

From 1991 to 1993 or 1994 my annual family holiday was to The Log Cabin, a simple wooden hut in the thick of the Belanglo State Forest. There was a drop toilet, bunks and not much else. All of a sudden we stopped going. Dad kept wearing the Log Cabin t-shirt my brother and I painted for him in 1994 but neither he nor mum answered us truthfully for over ten years: "why we aren't going to the Log Cabin this summer?" It wasn't until 2005 or so that my brother and I were told that Milat had dumped the bodies within walking distance of our beloved Log Cabin.



My dad, Garth Alperstein, wearing Log Cabin T-shirt (Alperstein, 2012).

I just quizzed my parents. Literally. As I write this I have just stopped speaking to the two of them. The first two bodies were found in the Belanglo Forest in September 1992 (Kennedy and Whittaker, 2001). In January 1993 we were there, holidaying, completely oblivious. Two more bodies were found in Belanglo in October 1993. Mum and dad aren't sure if the last time we went was 1993 or 1994, and some of our photo albums – evidence – are undated. Mum said they knew bodies had been found but didn't know a serial killer was on the loose. Dad said we were completely oblivious until a television news crew arrived at the cabin asking what he thought of the finds, and that was how they found out.

Dad:

'Some interviewer asked me, "So obviously you're happy to still be in the forest despite recent events?"

I said, "what recent events?"

"You're not phased by the finds then?"

"What finds?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Clearly I didn't know. I mean, come on. And then after that it was too creepy."



(Google Maps, 2012)

Nowadays it's as if Belanglo had no other past. Perhaps the forest marks the grave of hitchhiking as acceptable practice in Australia. Perhaps the news we consume has forged a bond too deep between Belanglo and murder. Belanglo? Backpacker murders. A search in the newspaper archives of search engine Factiva yields 1923 results for "Belanglo" between September 1992 and June 2012. Only 74 news articles don't mention Milat, murder or in some fashion a connection between Belanglo and loss or death or at least some sinister undercurrent. No archival records of original Gundungurra people exist. Aside from a few articles about pine plantations and orienteering prior to 1992, Belanglo is unaccounted for in recorded history.

"I used to hitchhike a fair bit m'self. You don't know what people are like anymore," said John Clarke. John was driving around the country setting up fences for agriculture fairs.

"It used to be a punch in the face to settle things but now people carry knives and guns. It's not fair that one person can ruin it for everyone but it happened, and if it wasn't Milat it would have been some other twisted bastard."

For my family the forest was innocent until our history crossed paths with Milat's. For my brother and I, Belanglo was an ancient Australian forest that smelt like Christmas – radiata pines are the most common Australian Christmas trees, yet they are not native to this land. Belanglo was where my

family, having emigrated from New York in 1990 (I was born here upon their arrival), first saw quintessentially Australian fauna: kangaroos, possums and wombats.

Kangaroo bones could be found near druidic red mushrooms with white spots – a warning: look but don't touch.

The perfect rows of pine trees, row after row after row, to a two-year-old demonstrative of the awesome symmetry of the natural world, are now reminiscent of silent rows of tombstones in a graveyard. Few animal species thrive in the non-native pines and the quiet lifelessness of the forest screams out like a cemetery too. The endangered Yellow-crested black cockatoo is one of the few native species that does thrive in the introduced pine forest. Their piercing, sorrowful screeches cut through the stillness of the pines.

## 2. Foraging.

The seventy-four articles out of almost 2000 that don't mention Milat and the backpacker murders concern themselves with: coal and coal seam gas mining (33) extreme weather (17), husky racing, orienteering, a photo prize, SES training and a mountain bike track.

Omitted from history as told by newspaper archives is the connection between Polish (and other Eastern and Southern European migrants) and the Belanglo State Forest. For the Polonia (Polish diaspora) in Australia, foraging for mushrooms at the foot of the pines in the Belanglo State Forest is as close to home as they get (Kwiatkowsky, 2004).

A remarkable natural phenomenon occurs in the liminal space between the Gundungurra soil on which the Belanglo State Forest was planted and the non-native radiata pines. *Lactarius deliciosus*, commonly known as Saffron milk caps or pine mushrooms, a wild mushroom species native to many parts of Europe, grow in abundance in the autumn months. The mushrooms only grow around pine trees, forming a symbiotic relationship with the tree roots where both help each other in being more efficient at absorbing water, nutrients and minerals.

Max Kwiatkowsky, in "Recreating the Polish 'homelandscape'", writes:

“The average driver may shudder when passing... Belanglo, but for those of Polish extraction the forest turnoff provides an opportunity to leave the main road and head... into the dark depths of the pine plantations, on their minds not murder, decomposing bodies, timber production or off-road driving but picnicking, mushrooms and memories of ‘home’ (2004, p19).

Kwiatkowsky has gone mushrooming at Belanglo with his family since arriving from Poland in 1986. For him, and for the Polonia in Sydney, the senses come alive at Belanglo and the forest isn't a “killing ground” but a place where “you can, however briefly, pretend you're standing in not Belanglo but a forest in Poland itself” (ibid, p30-31).

My most recent trip to Belanglo, in April this year, was a foraging expedition led by a Russian-born friend. For her, like for Kwiatkowsky, a trip to Belanglo is a trip home. We returned to Sydney unscathed, with over ten kilos of Saffron milk caps.

### **3. Gundungurra Land**

The Gundungurra People are the original custodians of the land on which Belanglo State Forest was planted.

“The Southern Highlands is "Gundungurra Land" - it includes Bowral, Mittagong, Moss Vale, Bundanoon, Robertson, Berrima, Hill Top, Colo Vale, Wingello and Penrose” (NSW Reconciliation Council, 2012).

“A convenient myth was that there had been no permanent Indigenous population in the area due to its cold winters, but that the area was visited during the summer months by neighbouring peoples from Tharawal, Pejar, and Wadi Wadi” (ibid).

The Wingecarribee Aboriginal Association explains that this history of disbelief ended following the formation of their association in 2000. Empirical, Western proof of existence in libraries or on plaques don't exist. Records of indigenous life at Belanglo, akin to the past of the Polonia after them, only exist through sensory experience.

Among the dirt roads and tall pines, the proof of another past is etched in rock. Harder to uproot or destroy by fire than foreign flora, metamorphic rock platforms still lies scattered throughout Belanglo State Forest. Spear-sharpening grooves worn in by repeated scraping of spear tips and holes widened and used to grind ochre and seeds, as well as store rainwater, can be found in Belanglo.



Above: My brother sharpens a stick in a groove worn by Indigenous inhabitants at Belanglo near the Log Cabin, while I inspect the rock (Becker, 1993).

Below: a carved-out hole used by the Gundungurra to collect water and grind ochre and grain, photo taken January 1993 but really it could be any time in the past tens of thousands of years (Becker, 1993).



To get a feel for pre-plantation Belanglo, apart from sharpening a spear in a groove worn by countless thousands of repeated strokes over thousands of years (the wood used is without doubt not growing by the sharpening groove any more), you have to venture to the outer parts of the forest – where the natural bush remains.

Depending on where you are amongst the pines it can be a short walk past the firebreak and into what for most of us, even city slickers like myself, are the familiar sounds, smells and colour palette of a south-eastern NSW eucalypt forest. The only difference here is mental – the knowledge that each of the nine bodies found in Belanglo has been discovered in the natural bush on the other side of the unwavering rows of pine.

Poet Geoff Page's Belanglo (1996a) is an ode to Milat, while Not A Day (1996b) commiserates the killed hitchhikers. Belanglo's twelve stanzas of rhyming couplets, frightening in their familiarity and simplicity, paint Milat as both the psychopath and the rural everyman:

“those moonlit gravels  
white as bone...  
the killer that  
we've always known” (Page, 1996a)

It's disconcerting, yes, but what's more frightening is that we convince ourselves of this one truth and this one past. One man and four years is all it took to construct a past, present and future and erase at least three other pasts at Belango.

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Back in 2010, a bag of groceries fell onto the road as I opened the front passenger door of a green station wagon. I jumped in next to Marieke Hol and her daughters Nuska and Claudia, six and two, were in the back trying to break a portable DVD player. The trio picked me up just before Dog On the Tuckerbox near Gundagai and took me to Moss Vale.

From the back seat six-year-old Nuska Hol, "My dad's an actor on City Homicide, do you know City Homicide?"

I admitted I didn't know it, I still don't.

Hours later, we pass Belanglo State Forest in golden afternoon sun. Marieke had been trying to persuade me that carrying a knife while hitchhiking is a good idea. She turns to her kids and asked, "What do you say we go for a walk and stretch our legs in the forest, girls?"

When she tells them she was only joking Claudia starts crying. It's been a long drive and we've only stopped twice.

For a few short moments as we fly past the Belanglo turnoff I am two years old again and the forest is in no way connected to violence it now can't seem to escape. It's an ancient wonderland filled with mushrooms to poke, grooves to sharpen sticks in and holes to grind the rocks we find in ponds.

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