

Australian PM says too much forestry 'locked up'

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In an address to a timber industry dinner, the centre-right leader said he would establish a new advisory council for the industry, calling it a sector that had been "frowned upon" for too long.

"For three years you were officially frowned upon here in Canberra because we had—I regret to say—a government that was over-influenced by the Greens," he told the gathering, referring to the previous Labor administration.

"I am so pleased that for the first time in many years, you can come into this building and not feel that you are in hostile territory."

Abbott said forest workers were not "environmental bandits" and loggers had a friend in Canberra.

He also defended the government's decision to remove World Heritage listing for 74,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest earlier this year, claiming it was not pristine.

"We don't support, as a government and as a coalition, further lockouts of our forests. We just don't support it," he told the function late Tuesday.

"We have quite enough national parks, we have quite enough locked up forests already. In fact, in an important respect, we have too much locked up forest."

Australia's timber industry contributes more than Aus\$22 billion (US\$19.7 billion) of economic turnover each year and employs over 66,000 people, but it often meets resistance from conservationists determined to protect native forests in national parks and reserves.

'Internationally embarrassing'

The Greens have labelled Abbott the "dig it up, cut it down prime minister", with party leader Christine Milne on Wednesday saying his words sent a clear message to the world "that Australia does not value its World Heritage areas or its national parks".

"People are going to be pretty upset that Tony Abbott is mounting this massive assault on the environment," she told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The government's environmental credentials were already under scrutiny after approving in December a massive coal port expansion and the dumping of dredge waste in the Great Barrier Reef.

Milne said repealing the World Heritage classification on Tasmanian forests would

ultimately prove destructive to the state's logging industry.

"Tony Abbott has got it so wrong. There's now a high level of recognition that we need to be protecting the last of our primary forests around the world," she said.

The Wilderness Society called the move to delist a large tract of Tasmanian forest and open it to loggers "environmentally reckless".

"This move is internationally embarrassing and questions Australia's commitment to our other natural World Heritage wonders including the Blue Mountains, Kakadu National Park, the Daintree Rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef," said the conservation group's director Lyndon Schneiders.

The move to delist the forest, which the Wilderness Society says is the first time a government anywhere has asked to remove a World Heritage property when its heritage values are still intact, is expected to be considered by UNESCO in June.

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