

From forest giant in Canada to floorboards in Australia

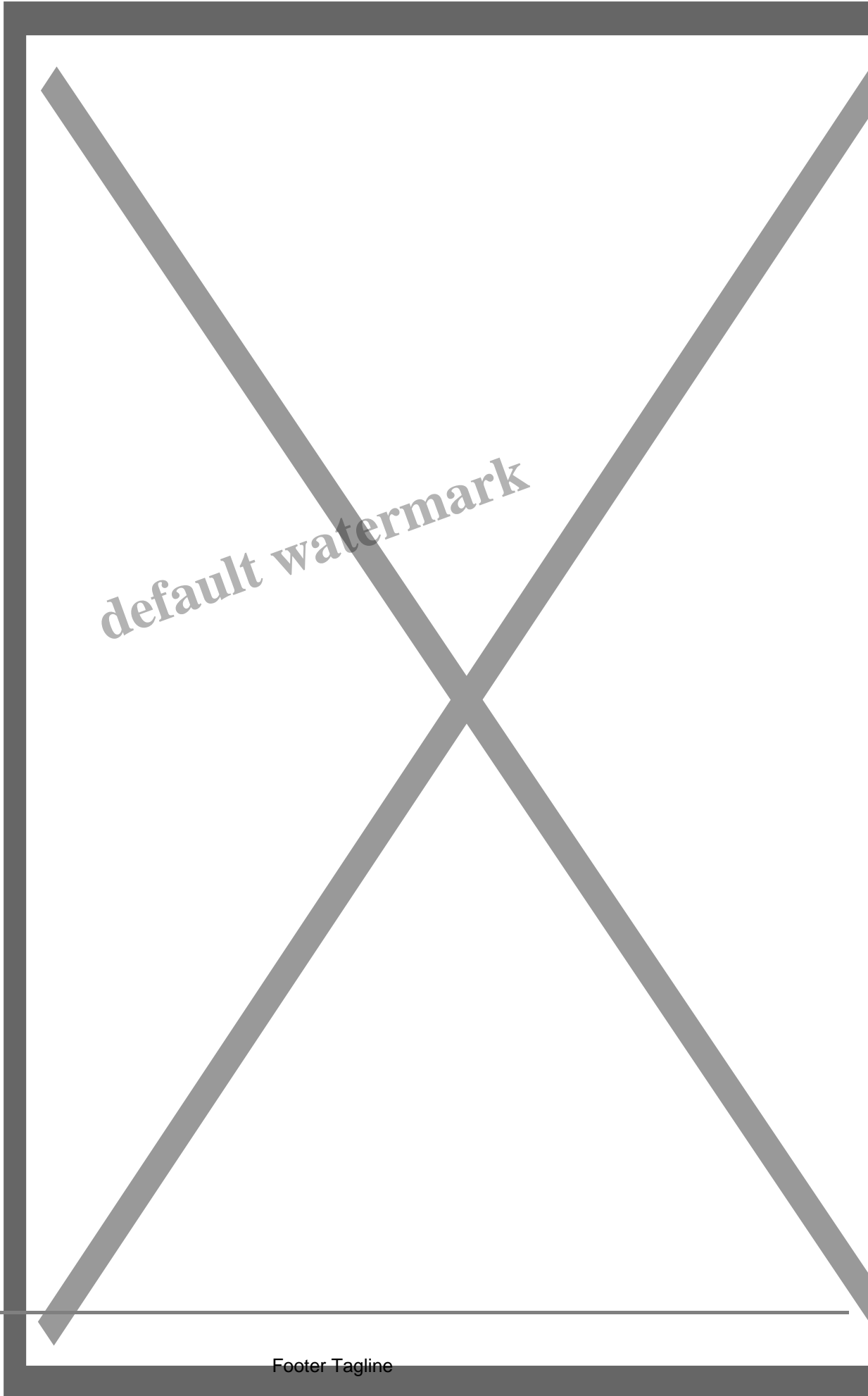
Description

default watermark

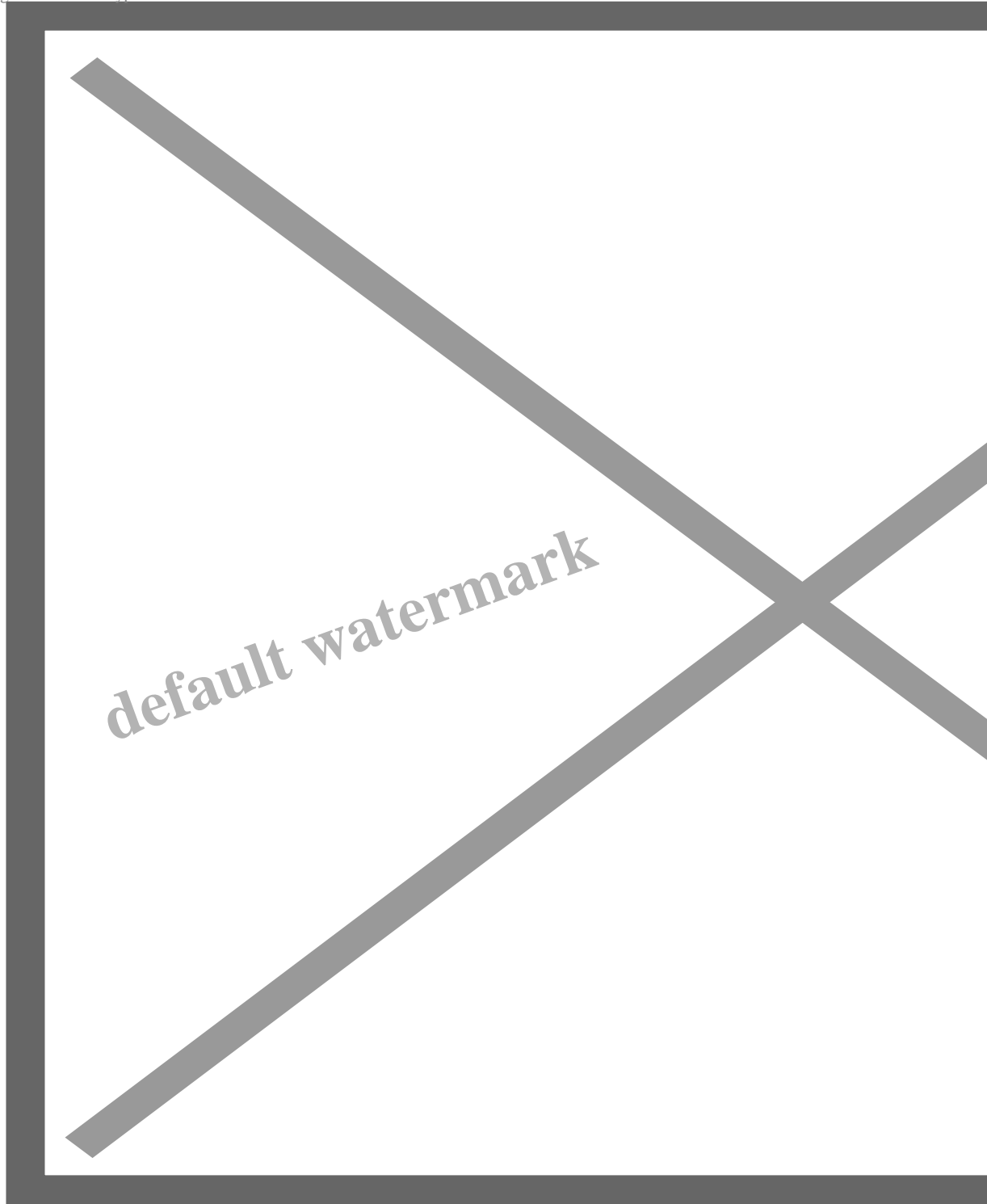
•

default watermark

Image not found or type unknown



• Image not found or type unknown



Giant Douglas Fir in the Avatar Grove, SW Vancouver Island and "Oregon Pine" floorboards in Fremantle, Western Australia

How the global timber trade turned giant Douglas Fir from Vancouver Island into floorboards in Fremantle.

An historical example of the global timber trade that has nothing much to do with guitars

A case of cognitive dissonance..

As someone with an ecology/conservation background, I love nature. I am awestruck whenever I'm in the natural world encountering magnificent trees, beautiful wildflowers and fascinating animals. I'm also saddened by the loss of so much of the natural world that's come about by human exploitation and transformation.

At the same time, I have the same sense of wonder and awe when I pick up a beautifully crafted guitar. The ability of someone to take the raw materials and turn them into an exquisite instrument never ceases to amaze me.

So, I find myself in a state of cognitive dissonance – on one hand, I love trees that remain vertical in nature, and on the other, I love something that can only exist because someone has turned a vertical tree into a horizontal one and then cut it up into pieces.

Perhaps this inner conflict would be less acute if the history of forest exploitation had been different. Forestry is a venerable profession, practiced for centuries. It can, when done well, manage forests so that they produce timber but also retain areas where trees can continue to grow. Traditional European foresters used to think in terms of centuries rather than years.

Unfortunately, long-term thinking got thrown out the window in colonial times – vast areas of forests in conquered lands around the world seemed to present an endless resource. And this was exploited to the hilt, seldom with any thought of either what was being lost or what might happen in the future.

This topic will recur in future posts. Here, I talk about a personal experience I had that rammed home to me the all-encompassing influence of the timber trade over the years – and also reflected further my cognitive dissonance regarding vertical and horizontal trees.

Fremantle floorboards

I spend a lot of time in my study/music room, which is in the original part of our house in Fremantle, Western Australia. Originally a worker's cottage built in 1895, it's part of [a wonderful architectural heritage](#) that Fremantle has managed to maintain.

Every day while playing guitar, I look at the floor of my study which has the original floor boards from 1895 that we found beautifully preserved under layers of linoleum and carpet when we renovated the old cottage. I love the floorboards – they are beautiful wood and also a slice of history.

These floorboards are made of what is locally known as Oregon Pine, a timber recognized to be of good heritage value. Oregon Pine is otherwise known as Douglas Fir, and it originates in the Pacific northwest of USA and Canada. Interestingly this species is neither a pine nor a fir, and its Latin name

is *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, literally Menzies' False Hemlock – beware of reading too much into the common names of plants!

From Vancouver Island to Fremantle

So, how is it that timber from a tree growing in the Pacific northwest ended up on the other side of the world as floor boards in a worker's cottage in Fremantle at the turn of the 19th century? I had never given this question much thought until I was lucky enough to spend time on Vancouver Island on the west coast of Canada. There we visited some of the last remaining stands of "old growth" forest containing huge trees of Douglas Fir and other species.

default watermark

•

default watermark

Image not found or type unknown

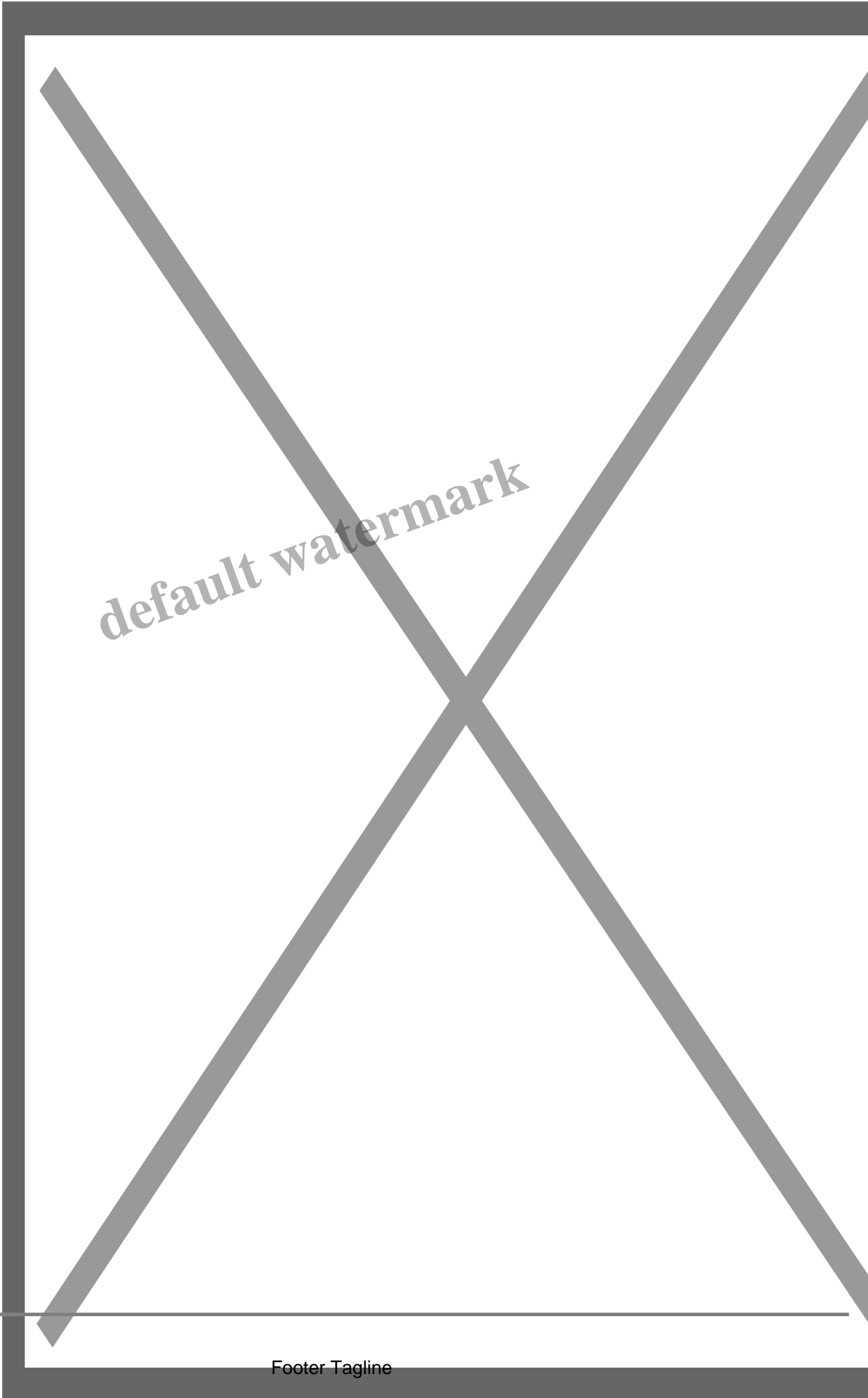
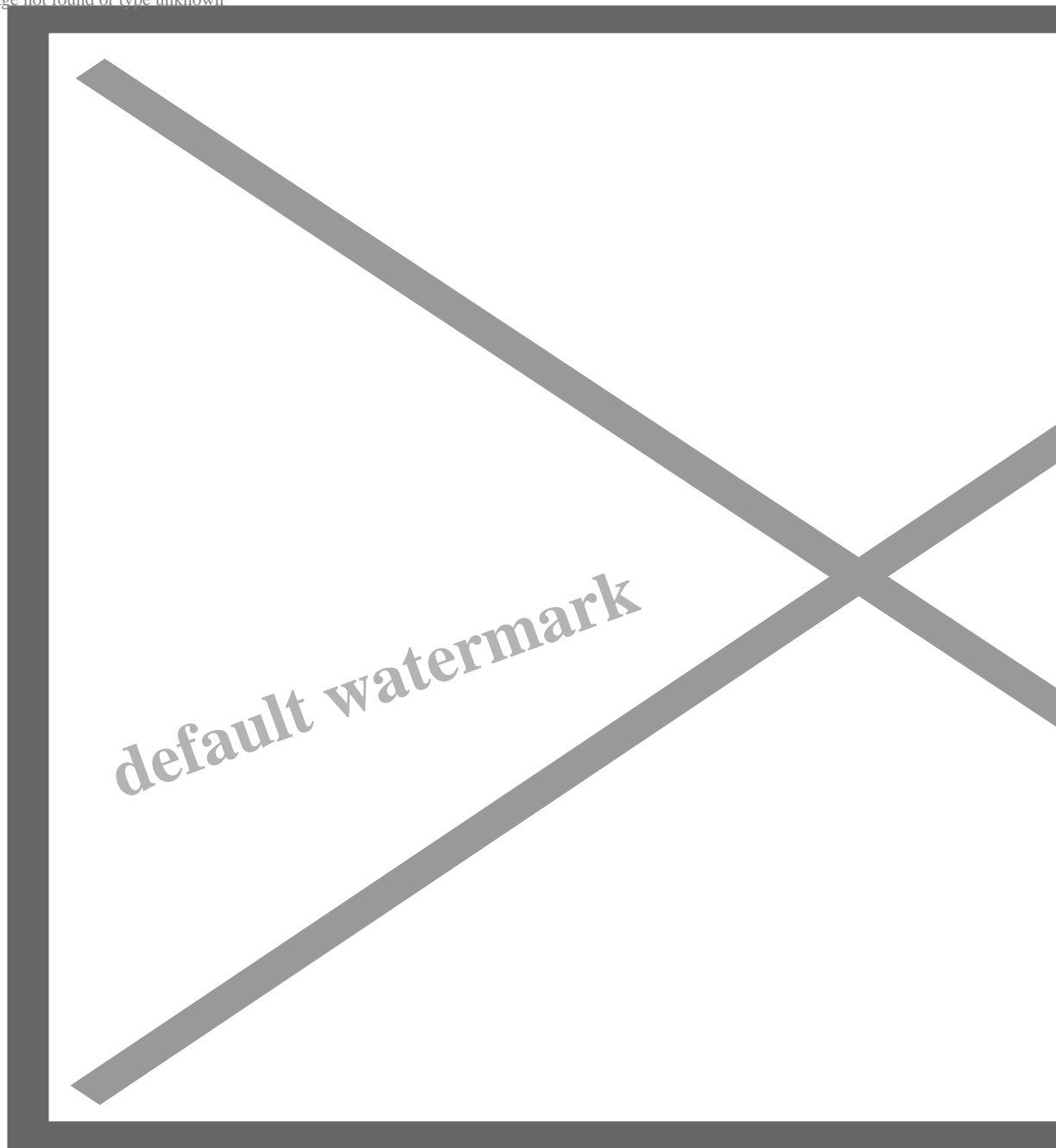


Image not found or type unknown



In the Avatar Grove near Port Renfrew, Vancouver Island, BC.

Old growth forest is forest that has never been logged and is often incredibly ancient – centuries if not millennia old. Not much old growth forest persists in the Pacific Northwest – most has been logged over the past 1-200 years. The logging of these forests mirrors that which has occurred – and continues to occur – in many other parts of the world. The story of the forests of North America and the people who logged them is epically recounted by Annie Proulx in [Barkskins](#).

Walking through magnificent groves of trees such as those in the Avatar Grove evokes feelings of awe,

but also of sadness that so little of the original forest remains. Although one can feel anger at the way the forests have been decimated, it's hard to not also feel a sense of admiration of the people who originally worked in these forests, felling great trees often by hand and in very dangerous and testing conditions.

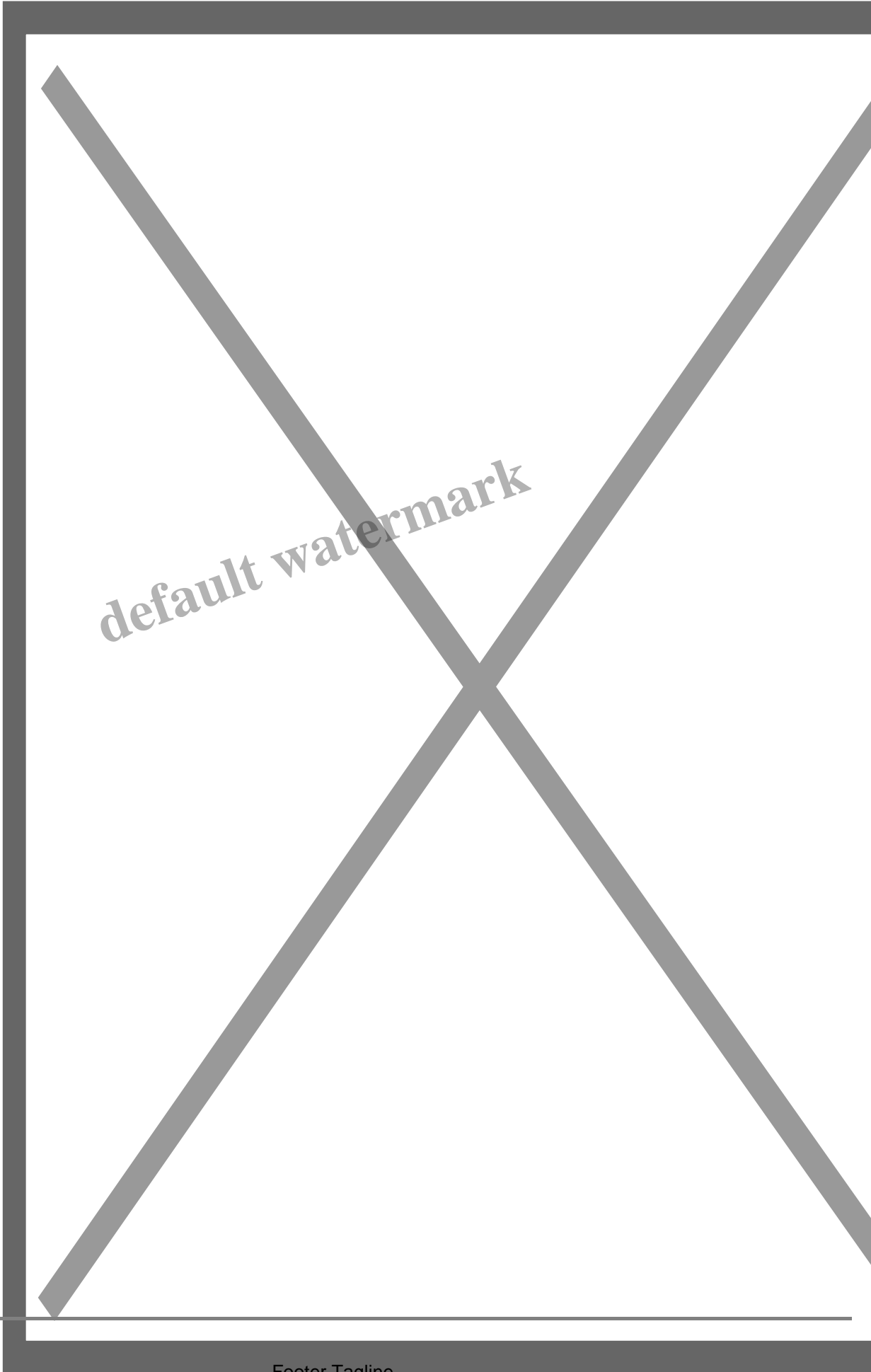
It was while reading Harley Rustad's book [Big Lonely Doug](#) that the connection between the amazing forests of British Columbia and the floorboards in a lowly Fremantle worker's cottage smacked me in the face. Big Lonely Doug is a huge individual Douglas Fir [that was left standing](#), not far from the Avatar Grove, while everything else around it was logged. Rustad goes through the history of logging in the area and notes that much of the timber extracted in the late 1800s was shipped out to places like Australia to be used in the construction of the growing colonies there.

default watermark

•

default watermark

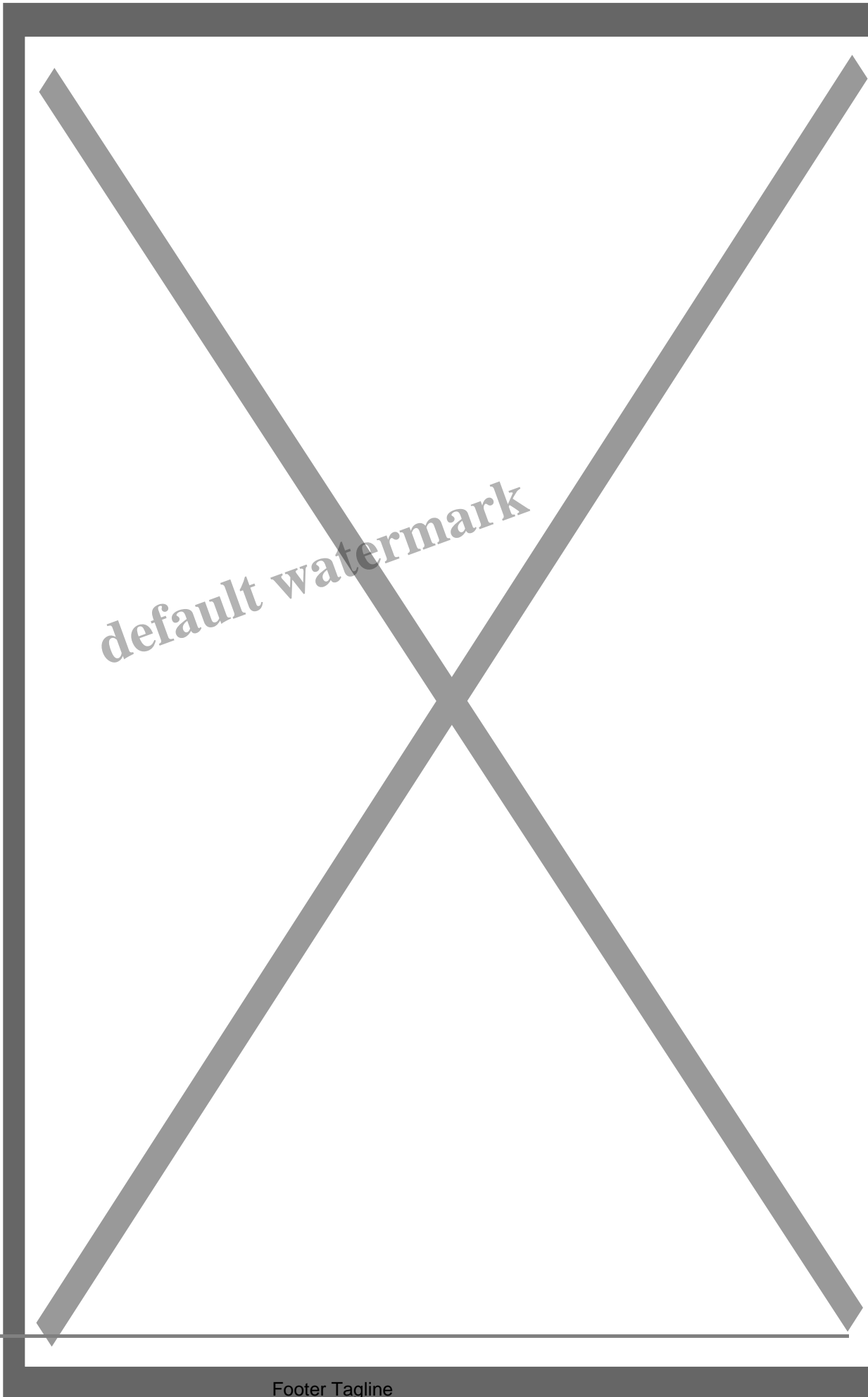
Image not found or type unknown



•

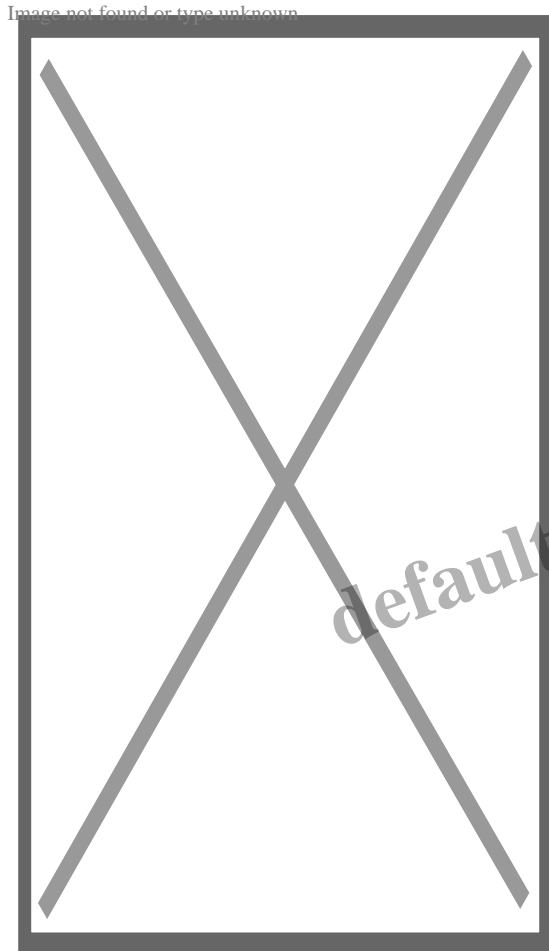
default watermark

Image not found or type unknown



It was viewed as an [excellent structural timber](#) and has been used here extensively – now, however, it is less prominent as a construction timber because the new plantation wood does not have the same structural properties as the old growth timber shipped from North America.

So my floorboards that I look at every day are highly likely to have come from old growth Douglas Fir forests similar to the Avatar Grove, and from a tree of similar proportions to Big Lonely Doug.



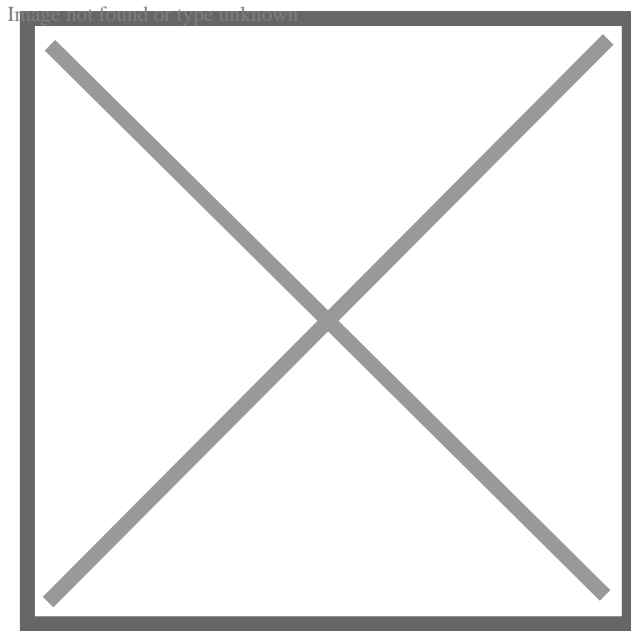
A close-up of one of the floor boards in my study. Across the width of a guitar pick are about 20 annual growth rings – roughly 7 rings per centimeter, meaning that the tree took about 7 years to put on a centimeter of girth at that stage of its life.

Meanwhile, Jarrah from Western Australia..

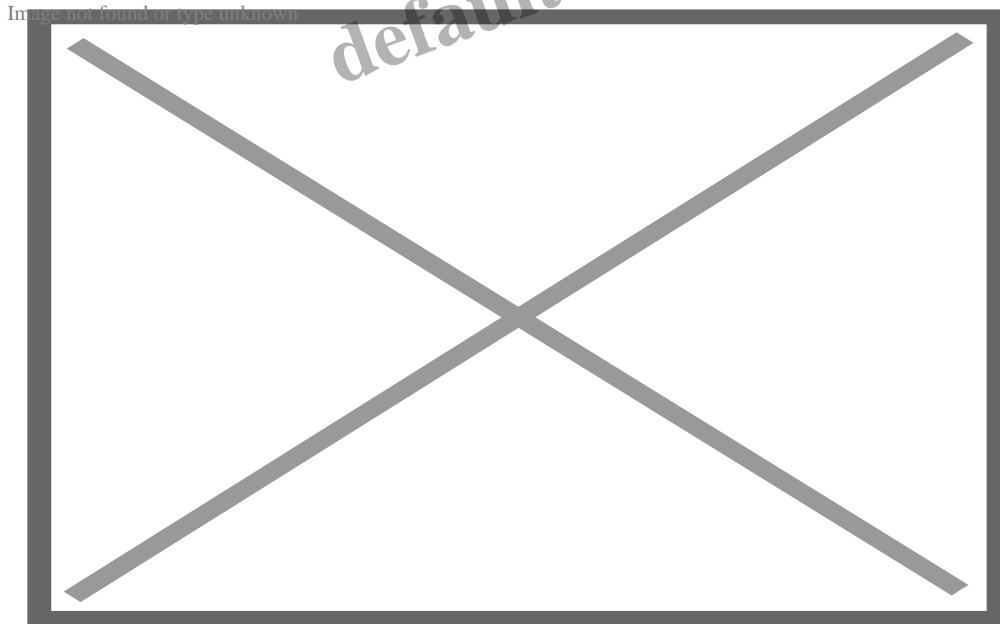
At the same time that timber from BC was making its way over here, timber from our local old growth forests – [jarrah \(*Eucalyptus marginata*\)](#) – was being shipped across the world to be used in many places as street cobbles, railway sleepers and other things. The colony of Western Australia was founded at Perth on 1 June 1829 by Captain James Stirling, and the first export from the Swan River Colony was 5 tons of jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) logged from [Mt Eliza in 1836](#).

Similar to the Pacific northwest story, there is now very little old-growth jarrah left, and the forests are

shades of their former selves after [a century and a half of over-exploitation](#).



Sir John Forrest, once Premier of Western Australia and Sir William Lyne (a Federal politician) felling a jarrah tree, around 1907. Photo: State Library of Western Australia



Old growth Jarrah forest is rare these days, and individual “king jarrahs” are [tourist attractions](#)

Although nothing to do with guitars (neither Douglas Fir or Jarrah are considered as particularly good woods for guitar construction), this little story is an interesting window into the world of forest exploitation and timber trade – and the events which have led to today’s conservation issues and trade restrictions.

My cognitive dissonance remains, but I also retain hope that there can be a balance between

preserving the last old growth forests of the world and continuing to produce wonderful musical instruments. Many guitar makers I have talked to feel the same way, and are trying a variety of ways to build sustainability into guitar manufacturing – as outlined in the earlier post, and as to be explored in more detail down the track.

Category

1. Uncategorized

Date Created

May 29, 2020

Author

the-nature-of-music

default watermark