

Victorian Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline 2020

To: The Environment and Planning Committee

From: John Bardsley, F.R.A.C.P.

Date: 8th August, 2020

The Victorian State of the Environment Report 2018 said that most biodiversity indicators are poor and trending downwards. If radical changes are not made to the protection and enhancement of biodiversity this trend will continue.

Land clearing

Habitat loss is a major cause of biodiversity loss in Victoria. Even within the Urban Growth Boundary of the City of Greater Bendigo bush is being lost at an alarming rate due to land clearing for housing development. This is just a microcosm for that which is occurring throughout the state. Offsetting land cleared for development is insufficient as it results in a net loss of vegetation and habitat.

Recommendation: Perhaps a more meaningful arrangement would be to protect in perpetuity an area of land the size of the development and insist the developer revegetate an equivalent area of degraded land. If the land is of high conservation value it should not be allowed to be developed.

Clear fell logging of native forests is a major cause of habitat destruction. Current forestry practice is to replant clear felled coupes with monocultures such as *Eucalyptus sieberi*, which, when mature, is suitable for the logging industry but diminishes biodiversity. Even if clear felled land is left to regenerate it would take 100s of years to achieve a forest of complexity, and this is unlikely to eventuate due to climate change.

Recommendation: (i) Clear fell native forest logging should cease immediately, not in 2030 as proposed by the Andrews' government. (ii) Those in the industry should be assisted to find new employment.

The two hundred year history of farming in Victoria has contributed to the state being the most cleared in the Commonwealth. Apart from the obvious fragmentation of ecosystems the widespread over clearing of the landscape has meant that less than 30% tree cover leads to fewer bird species, and fewer birds within those species.

“..an average of 30-35% native vegetation cover is necessary. It is not practical to have uniform cover of 30-35% on all farms and landscapes, but we need to ensure that areas with high vegetation cover are regularly interspersed among those where native vegetation has been heavily cleared....Individual actions do make a difference in rural landscapes: *protecting* patches of native vegetation, especially key parts of the landscape such as streamside vegetation, scarce vegetation types and large blocks of habitat; *thing together* the landscape by maintaining natural vegetation along creeks and streams, protecting remnant corridors' and 'stepping stones' of bushland, and building on to existing blocks of bush; *increasing* the total amount of habitat for wildlife by natural regeneration and strategic revegetation.”¹

Recommendation: (i) Farmers should be given incentives to look after and improve the landscape. (ii) To assist with waterway recovery fencing of adequate riparian zones should be mandated.

The Marine Environment

There is an inadequate network of marine conservation areas to protect from over fishing and mollusc extraction. Past and proposed dredging activities have, or will have, negative effects on the marine and coastal environment.

The Port Phillip Bay dredging continues to cause significant erosion at Portsea, Sorrento and Blairgowrie. The proposed dredging of Westernport Bay for the planned A.G.L. gas terminal at Hastings should not be allowed to proceed. Not only would it impinge on a Ramsar listed wetland, the dredging of the channel would negatively impact the water flows in the bay.

¹ “How much habitat is enough?” October 2004, pamphlet prepared by Jim Radford, Andrew Bennett and Lindy MacRaild, School of Ecology and Environment, Deakin University.

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Recommendation: (i) Increase marine conservation areas. (ii) Do not allow the proposed A.G.L. terminal at Hastings to proceed.

Climate Change

There is a direct effect of climate warming damaging floral ecosystems designed to thrive under cooler conditions. My local observations in the bush around Bendigo bear this out. One major effect of global warming has been the increase in the length of the bushfire season, the increase in frequency of fires and the ferocity of those fires. “The first national assessment of the damage wrought by the unprecedented summer bushfires on native animals finds there is likely to be a dramatic increase in the number of species facing extinction. A study of the effects of fires between July 2019 and February 2020 found 21 threatened species including the long footed potoroo and Eastern bristle bird are among 70 animal types that had more than 30% of their habitat burnt.”² This habitat loss puts them at a far greater risk of extinction and “the number of threatened Australian terrestrial and freshwater animals would increase by 14%, researchers found.”³

Recommendations: (i) For the long term there must be a more concerted effort to attack global warming in an attempt to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees centigrade.

(ii) There must be a massive investment in rapid strike bushfire suppression particularly with the purchase of fire-fighting aeroplanes and helicopters.

(iii) Preventative burning of the bush, as recommended by the post-black Saturday Royal Commission has clearly been ineffective, possibly counterproductive, and should be abandoned. There is probably merit in asset protection burning and perimeter clearing.

Public land

Public land is where many of Victoria’s ecosystems reside. Insufficient resources are provided by government for the maintenance of this repository of biodiversity.

Recommendation: (i) Indigenous people should be increasingly involved in management decisions.

(ii) The government should approve the recommendations of the Victorian Environment Assessment Council Central West Investigation Report June 2019 and create the new national parks and reserves suggested.

(iii) Double funding to maintain and protect National Parks to 1% of the State budget.

Feral animals

Feral animals cause enormous destruction in Victoria and are poorly controlled. Horses in the High Country trample vegetation and muddy waterways. There is an explosion of deer across the state. Rabbits and pigs are still not adequately controlled. Foxes and dogs remain a problem. Feral cats cause enormous destruction to small mammals, birds and reptiles.

Recommendations: A larger investment should be made to eradicate these pests, perhaps with species specific bounties.

Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act was enacted in 1988, its objective being to “guarantee the survival of all of Victoria’s flora and fauna.”

It has failed as indicated by the 2018 State of the Environment Report and this inquiry into Victoria’s ecosystems decline. A review by the Auditor General in 2009 found that successive governments had all but abandoned implementing key parts of the act. In 2019 Environmental Justice Australia(EJA) found that nothing had changed since that review finding that “the FFG Act remains very poorly implemented with many of the legal measures to protect flora and fauna never used. Fewer than half of the 675 species listed under the act have Recovery Action Statements prepared despite this being

² “Mega-fires push more animals to the edge” Miki Perkins, The Age, Tuesday, July 21, 2020 p. 13

³ Ibid.

a mandatory requirement of the FFG Act. Only one new Action Statement has been developed in the past year.”

The Act was reviewed in 2019 and changes made into law in 2020. Important amendments are “to guarantee that all taxa of Victoria’s flora and fauna....can persist and improve in the wild and retain their capacity to adapt to environmental change.”⁴ According to EJA, shortcomings of the bill are that important conservation mechanisms under the current 1988 Act, such as critical habitat determination and conservation orders, are never used and the reforms do nothing to fix this. There are still key parts of the act where the conservation tools available remain optional despite the threat of extinction.

Whether threatened species are protected remains at the discretion of the Minister or Department. This has not worked for the benefit of the environment since 1988.

Recommendations: (i) The Minister and Department should be bound by law to carry out the objectives of the FFG Act using the tools provided in the Act.

Conclusion

Across the board, successive Victorian governments have been found wanting in the conservation, protection and improvement of the irreplaceable ecosystems which sustain us all. The disastrous decline in Victorian ecosystems could continue unless there is strengthened environmental law, the political commitment to cultural change in the administration of an even stronger FFG Act, and funding made available to use the tools therein.

Thank you for considering my submission,
John Bardsley, F.R.A.C.P.

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⁴ Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) ebulletin July 2020 dated 31/7/20