

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

"Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone..."

–Joni Mitchell, Big Yellow Taxi

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry, and I applaud the government's attention to this pressing issue.

Australia's unique plants and critters, and their myriad complex relationships, are both endlessly fascinating and critically important to our world. One tiny example is the Nodding Greenhood Orchid (*Pterostylis nutans*), endemic to our southeastern coast. It's only known pollinator is a particular species of fungus gnat, which it entices by emitting a kairomone. When the orchid flower senses the right sort of gnat landing near its labellum, it tips the insect into the flower. Wriggling around to escape, the gnat contacts the flowers' sexual organs and stimulates pollination. It's unknown how valuable this entrancing interaction may be to humans, but a similar example from across the world, the Vanilla Orchid (*Vanilla planifolia*), gives us a glimpse of its culinary and medicinal possibilities. Native to Central America, the Vanilla Orchid is thought to be (i.e. it remains a mystery to science) pollinated in the wild only by a species of stingless bee and/or hummingbird, and requires laborious hand-pollination in cultivation. Originally cultivated by Aztec peoples in the 15th Century, vanilla is now used worldwide in commercial and domestic baking, perfume production, and aromatherapy, and is the second-most expensive spice after saffron. We can't imagine life without vanilla.

Please bear with me; this seemingly random little story underscores the premise of my submission, which is that our richly biodiverse ecosystems are crucial to us in ways we may never know. And, further, that ecosystem health is critical to humankind's very existence.

However, it's apparent that our increasingly individual-focused and city-based society is blinding us to the importance of the natural world. If we care at all, it's usually because of an emergency (such as the 2020 Southeastern Australian bushfires), and because we focus on individual and charismatic plants and animals (not that this has protected them from destruction) to the exclusion of the habitats needed to sustain them. We're oblivious to the consequences of our own destructive actions (e.g. throwing a cigarette butt into a gutter, bulldozing a patch of grassland to make way for a new housing development, waving through approval for a new mine or dam or feedlot), seeing them as somehow separate from the unfolding environmental devastation we see on the news.

I believe what's needed to arrest the catastrophic decline in our ecosystems is a quantum shift in thinking, from seeing ourselves as individuals operating in our own bubble separate from nature, to seeing ourselves as fundamentally and inextricably connected with all living things and reliant on biodiverse ecosystems to breathe, live, and survive. An example of a need for a shift in thinking is this inquiry itself: holding a state-based ecosystem inquiry is almost an oxymoron. I mean no disrespect when I say that it seems bizarre to me to investigate ecosystems as if they start and stop at our arbitrarily/politically-drawn borders. However, the best chance we have to coordinate and protect biodiversity efforts across state borders, the national *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, is failing dismally. It's currently under review as well, but any law that allows states to determine their own logging, water allocation, wildlife protections and the like, is problematic.

To complicate things further, Australians appear to possess a collective cognitive dissonance when it comes to our environment: we live on the driest inhabitable continent on earth and yet we squander potable water on an unfathomable scale. We have one of the greatest levels of solar coverage per square metre in the world, and yet we have no coherent national solar power policy. We're blessed as one of the top 10 biodiverse countries in the world, with the majority of our flora and fauna species found *nowhere else in the world*, and yet we continue to drive these unique species to extinction at a depressingly inexorable rate.

In the face of rising salinity, soil erosion, catastrophic bushfires, dieback, and other dire indicators of ecosystem decline, we stubbornly keep growing the wrong crops, raising the wrong livestock, wasting water, clearing bushland, over-developing and over-building land, fragmenting ecosystems, allowing entire species to go extinct, and bulldozing, burning, clear-felling and culling.

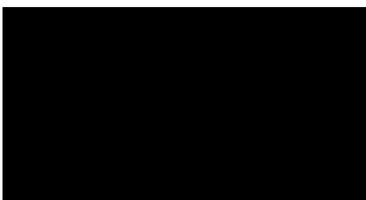
However, I believe that we ignore the interconnectedness of all things, at our peril.

Here's what I offer:

- We need to stop seeing wildlife as pests and native vegetation as unproductive, ugly, or an infinite resource to be plundered.
- We need to look at our environment and all that dwells therein as inherently valuable, precious, connected, and irreplaceable.
- We must instil a reverence for our flora and fauna that begins at birth, is taught at schools and universities, and is fundamental to every choice we make as citizens, workers, governments, businesses, and custodians of this incredibly country.
- Respect, awe and love for our unique environment must be reflected in robust, coordinated and powerful national, state, local government legislation. The rights of individuals and vested interests can no longer take priority over our environment.
- Embrace and integrate Indigenous knowledge into all aspects of our environmental policies, approaches and activities.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kind regards,



Diana Wolfe



31 July 2020