

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA – PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

Allan G. Rossiter B.Sc(Hons), M.Sc, Ph.D

It is about time we stopped flogging ideologies and playing politics and got smart about conserving the environment in Victoria. The conservation movement in this state has been a disastrous failure. We have more parks and so-called "protected areas" than ever, but ecosystems continue to degrade. WAKE UP VICTORIANS - THE CURRENT STRATEGY ISN'T WORKING!!

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) has stated "we are currently losing native vegetation extent and condition at a rate higher than any gains made through improved protection and management". The same would surely be true of native fauna. This is a damning admission that the current practice of tying land up as national, state and regional parks does not work.

The VNPA has further stated "Without good data to make decisions, we are possibly wasting large amounts of money and reducing the integrity of our ecosystems with no real benefit to the community, with insufficient scientific basis and little or no monitoring. This is something that would not be acceptable in our hospitals, nor would it be tolerated from our engineers or bridgebuilders". This statement is equally applicable to the willy-nilly declaration of parks within the state.

Before any more regional, state or national parks are declared in Victoria, government agencies must demonstrate scientifically that declaring parks does anything positive for the environment. If this cannot be done, the government has a scandal on its hands and there must be a massive shake-up of the environmental bureaucracy.

The township of Bright (where I grew up) was lousy with bandicoots in the 1950's. The town contained plenty of cats (both domestic and feral), but the bandicoots coped okay. If a fox appeared in the valley it was turned into money and then a fur coat. Fox numbers had been controlled by shooting for about 90 years at that stage. Now we have clever people saying that you cannot control fox numbers by shooting and we have a multitude of national (and other) parks, but we have no bandicoots. Surely there is a lesson to be learned here.

There isn't enough funding to properly manage the existing parks and this situation is not going to improve as hostility towards regional business such as mining and sawmilling becomes more and more fashionable. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) is clearly not concerned about the economic damage its recommendations might inflict, otherwise it would have commissioned a study into the mineral prospectivity of the

Central West Region and not worried quite so much about which road cuttings were geologically important.

The social and economic analysis carried out as part of the VEAC Central West Investigation was a joke. A gross benefit to the Victorian economy of \$270 million (present value over 30 years) was considered to be the result of "improved protection of native vegetation". How providing a sanctuary for feral plants and animals can improve native vegetation was not discussed.

The likely costs of the VEAC Central West recommendations were estimated to be \$22 million mostly resulting "from impacts on wood product harvesting and recreational prospecting, hunting and dog walking". Any costs associated with a reduction in mining were "not quantified". If another Fosterville-scale gold deposit is tied up by the green grab the figures become nonsensical. In 2019 the Fosterville mine produced 619,366 oz of gold worth about \$1.2 billion.

If VEAC wasn't full of dogmatists, the fact that areas that have been used economically for 150 years are still worth turning into national parks would be ringing a few bells. VEAC recently stated "Wellsford forest is one of the largest, best condition box-ironbark forests in Victoria". How can this be if it is a mere state forest? Stopping recreational hunting in such an area can only do harm.

That VNPA can record very significant biodiversity (e.g. 130 bird species, "many orchids"- Mount Cole; 100 bird species, 200 plant species- Pyrenees Ranges, 350 plant species, 200 vertebrate species- Wombat Forest) remaining in state forests after 150 years of exploitation indicates surely that these ecosystems are better off managed than locked up. Locking up this land to allow feral plants and animals to proliferate is stupid, especially when the economic costs (e.g. gold production forsaken) are factored in.

It is time the environmental movement in Victoria (including DELWP, VNPA and VEAC) got serious about controlling pest plants and animals. WHERE IS THE PEST-CONTROL MASTERPLAN? It is all very well for VEAC to recommend that "government allocates adequate financial and staff resources" to look after parks but a lot more than that is required. Please explain to me how deer proliferating in parks where hunting is prohibited is good for plants.

It is time we worked out whether declaring national (and other) parks does more harm than good. Given the current economic outlook for Victoria we cannot afford any more national, state or regional parks, especially if we don't know whether they work or not. The existing Special Protection and Special Management Zones (with adequately funded management provided in part by flourishing regional businesses) are sufficient to protect Victoria's ecosystems.