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Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Mr Jonathan Starks
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SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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I have worked as an ecologist for over 30 years, both in Aus and overseas, on threatened species, recovery teams, habitat restoration, population monitoring, revegetation... Beyond the initial ecological catastrophes from habitat clearing, changed fire regimes, grazing, introduced pest animals and weeds, pollution, herbicides and pesticides, I view continuing ecosystem decline as like 'death by a thousand cuts'. It is an on-going, insidious decline brought about through successive government inaction and an unwillingness to tackle the issue. Examples are:

The loss of western grasslands near Melbourne through unchecked urban growth.

Rampant collection of firewood from roadsides, rivers, reserves to feed the insatiable appetite of people with wood heaters. Tons of wood in the form of dead or fallen trees, limbs, and sometimes felled living trees are collected annually. Some people sell it for extra income, others store it in huge rotting piles, 'just in case they need it in the future', tons go to urban centres and all of it results in a loss of a habitat component for biodiversity.

Roadside cropping. Allowing farmers to remove boundary fences and crop beyond their fence onto roadsides, destroying grasslands, woodlands and revegetation areas.

Harrowing firebreaks on the roadside of farm paddocks. It spreads weeds and has the same affect as cropping.

Loss of paddock trees. Weak native vegetation clearing laws. If only Victoria had the same strict laws as South Australia. Mostly, there is a complete unwillingness of DELWP/Parks Vic/Councils to enforce current laws. Partly due to lack of resources.

Vegetation offset laws are a joke. Being allowed to clear an area and then purchasing the protection of another, existing patch to improve it still results in a net loss of hectares of native vegetation. Offsets should include a ten-fold revegetation area.

There is no real incentive for farmers to protect native vegetation on their land, other than good will. Farmers who protect native vegetation on their land, either through a covenant, Catchment Management Authority, Landcare or other agreement should not have to pay rates for that area of land. A council rates rebate scheme needs state or federal funding, councils can't afford them.

Wind turbines in coastal areas. Bit late now but what affect did coastal turbines have on migratory species such as

Orange-bellied Parrots, Swift Parrots, Blue-winged Parrots, and on birds of prey?

Lack of long-term commitment to re-wilding. Bringing back predator species such as quolls could be an effective way of helping to control rabbits, hares etc.

Farmers should have to meet minimum standards for biodiversity on their properties. They own vast areas of productive land but there are no biodiversity planning laws governing how much native vegetation should remain, designated waterways protected, biolinks/corridors etc. Farmers should have something along the lines of a licence to farm, in the same way that industry has to have permits etc to operate. The cost of maintaining biodiversity assets on a farm should be met by the state, through rates rebates, business offsets, carbon trading etc.

A carbon trading scheme could be an income earner for a farmer. Any revegetation planted to sequester carbon would have to meet certain standards, such as correct species for EVC, not just a plant it and forget it scheme where anything is grown, as long as it's a gum tree or wattle.

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