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Sent: Monday, 17 August 2020 1:12 PM
To: ecosystems
Subject: Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria. As you know, once a species is extinct it can never return. Not only is part of our unique ecosystem lost forever, but we lose the resulting tourism and environmental quality that comes with having diverse wildlife also. We have no right to make species extinct.

INTRODUCTION

I am making a submission as a member of the public because I'm deeply concerned about the declining health of Victoria's environment. All of us depend on a healthy environment for our own health and wellbeing, and it's vitally important for MPs from all parties and the Victorian Government to take action to protect and restore our environment.

In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of Victoria's environment. The findings were released in 2019 and are alarming. The health of Victoria's environment is considered 'good' in just 11% of areas, and is going backwards in 30% of areas. We cannot afford to let this trend continue. Instead, we need to take urgent action to restore our environment to good health.

I understand that the Victorian Government was required to respond to the State of Environment Report with a plan of action within 12 months, and I'm disappointed this hasn't happened. While I know COVID-19 is taking a lot of the Government's attention, most of the 12 month period the Government had to respond to this report was prior to the COVID emergency.

MAJOR CAUSES OF DECLINE IN VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT

Decline in Victoria's ecosystems and wildlife is driven by some key threats. I have not gone into a lot of detail as scientists and other experts will provide the committee with this information. However, I wanted to highlight these key threats, as I would like to see this committee consider and address them.

Climate change - Burning coal, oil and gas in the last two centuries has warmed the global climate by 1 degree celsius. This is having a profound impact on our planet, including in Victoria, and is causing more catastrophic bushfires, extreme weather events and sea level rises.

Last summer, we experienced Australia's worst bushfire season in history. People lost their lives and homes, cities were blanketed in dangerous smoke for months and more than 1 billion animals perished. Forests burned at an unprecedented scale, including rainforests that have never burned before.

Solution 1: Victoria must urgently stop burning fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) for energy by 2030 and should reduce other sources of greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. from transport and agriculture) to limit global warming and its impacts.

Land clearing and deforestation - Logging and clearing of native vegetation in Victoria has severely reduced our native plants, which themselves provide habitat for our unique and diverse animals, birds, insects and reptiles.

Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with around two thirds of the state cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants. In Victoria, over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are under threat.

The declining state of biodiversity in Victoria was made profoundly worse with the Black Summer fires, which burned 1.4 million hectares, just in Victoria, and destroyed more than 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals, plants and other creatures.

Victoria has more than 70 forest dependent threatened species, yet native forest logging is set to continue until 2030 in Victoria. This is despite a recent federal court case that found much logging in Victoria is in breach of national environmental laws and is directly driving animal extinction.

Solution 2: Victoria should immediately transition out of native forest logging, with financial support for workers and the industry. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimates this would save the Victorian budget \$190 million.

Invasive species - Introduced plants and animals have a profound negative impact on Victoria's environment. Introduced animals like deer cause damage to our alpine landscapes and native vegetation. They also outcompete native wildlife. Deer are just one example. Other examples of damaging invasive animals include foxes, rabbits, cats, pigs and horses. Invasive weeds are also very prevalent in Victoria. They clog up streams and rivers, smother native plants and don't provide the food and habitat that native wildlife need.

Solution 3: Victoria needs a comprehensive and fully funded program to remove introduced plants and animals and a massive replanting program to restore habitat across the state. This would also be a great way to employ many out-of-work Victorians as we rebuild our economy following COVID-19.

SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT AND RESTORE VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT

As well as the solutions already identified, I'd like to see the committee look into some interventions that I believe are particularly important for Victoria to take up to protect and restore our landscapes and threatened species.

A save our species program for Victoria

Victoria has some truly remarkable wildlife, from our colourful birds, weird and wonderful sea creatures, to animals like the flying greater glider and iconic koala. This wildlife is so special to me and to many other Victorians.

Yet since European settlement, Victoria has lost 18 species of mammal, 2 birds, 1 snake, 3 freshwater fish, 6 invertebrates and 51 plants have become extinct. Today, between one quarter and one third of all of Victoria's terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals, along with numerous invertebrates and ecological communities, are considered threatened with extinction.

Based on publicly available information, it's not obvious how much funding and what types of interventions are being undertaken to restore our threatened species in Victoria. In contrast, New South Wales has a detailed Save Our Species program, with a dedicated \$100 million in funding.

I'm extremely upset about the plants and wildlife we've already lost to extinction in Victoria, and I hope this inquiry will recommend urgent action to turn things around for the many species now on the brink of extinction.

Solution 4: A save our species fund for Victoria with substantial new government funding (minimum \$100 million) to restore threatened species in Victoria, as well as public information outlining what public funding is spent on threatened species conservation and how it is being spent.

Deliver promised grassland reserves

Before colonisation, grasslands and woodlands covered over a third of Victoria, yet less than 5% of these areas remain. Grasslands are incredibly important habitat for a range of native plants and animals, including the spiny rice flower and southern brown bandicoot - now on the brink of extinction.

While the Victorian Government has a commitment to deliver a new 15,000 hectare grassland reserve, and a 1,200 hectares Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands Reserve (by purchasing and restoring private land) by 2020, only 10% of the grassland has been purchased and none of the grassy woodland habitat.

Solution 5: Victorian Government must purchase the required area of grassland and woodland reserves outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment plan by December 2021 and fully restore these within the next two years.

Funding for private land conservation

Due to the extent of land clearing in Victoria, some of our most threatened ecosystems and important habitat is on private land. Organisations like Trust for Nature and Bush Heritage have demonstrated that purchase and restoration of habitat remnants of private land is incredibly beneficial for threatened species recovery. These programs would benefit enormously from public funding in the form of a “revolving fund” to enable the purchase, restoration and sale (for conservation purposes) of private land.

Solution 6: Establish a Victorian Government funded \$50 million “revolving fund” to purchase, restore and then resell private land for conservation. The fund is “revolving” because some of the money is put back in once the land is restored and sold.

Mandatory nature laws

Victoria’s primary legislation for ecosystem and threatened species protection is the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. Yet in the life of this legislation, we’ve seen the deterioration of Victoria’s environment because the laws lack the teeth they need to protect the environment for destructive activities including logging and damaging developments like roads, mines and new housing developments. The key flaw in these laws is that intervention to protect the environment is discretionary - it’s up to the Minister for Environment to use these powers only if they want to. In practice, successive Victorian Environment Ministers chose not to use these powers because they sit within Labor or Liberal governments who chose to prioritise destructive activities.

Solution 7: Reform Victoria’s Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act so that where private or government activities would damage our ecosystems and threatened species, the Environment Minister must by law step in to prevent or limit the activity.

CONCLUSION

Right now, I know the Victorian Government is grappling with COVID-19. Unfortunately, however, the threats to our environment have not gone away because of COVID-19. We all depend on a healthy world for our own health and happiness, and that means we need to be able to tackle the health crisis of COVID-19, while also protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems, that our animals, plants, people and communities depend on.

I look forward to seeing strong action to protect and restore Victoria's environment as a result of the work of this committee.

I am happy for my submission to be made public.

Yours sincerely,

Ruth McClelland

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