

From: Vivien Smith <campaigns@good.do>
Sent: Monday, 17 August 2020 6:14 PM
To: ecosystems
Subject: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Categories: Submissions

Dear Committee Members,

I am making a personal submission to this enquiry because I am very concerned about the declining health of all facets of Victoria's natural environment. Everyone needs uncontaminated air, soil and water for our own health and wellbeing. It is therefore vitally important that MPs from all parties, including the Victorian Government itself, support legislation for the effective protection, and where necessary the genuine restoration, of all aspects of our environment within the not too distant future..

In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of our state's environment. The findings, released in 2019, are alarming. The health of Victoria's environment is considered 'good' in only 11% of areas, and is going backwards in 30% of areas. These are indeed sobering figures!

For the sake of our children and beyond, surely we cannot afford to let this trend continue. It is imperative that we take urgent action to restore our environment to good health. Yet the Victorian Government has so far failed to even respond to this report with any meaningful plan to improve the situation within the required 12 months, let alone take any concrete steps towards that goal. Whilst I realise that COVID-19 has been occupying much of the Victorian Government's attention over the last 6 months, there was sufficient time to respond to this report before this health emergency became all-consuming.

The decline in Victoria's ecosystems and wildlife is being driven by two key threats. Climate change is obviously one of these. Burning coal, oil and gas in the last two centuries has warmed the global climate by 1 degree celsius. Although 1 degree does not sound significant, it is in fact having a profound impact on our planet, including here in Victoria. Without urgent mitigation measures, we will face ever more frequent and more catastrophic bushfires, extreme weather events and sea level rises every year. It has been predicted that by 2030 much of our coast and arable areas will be permanently or frequently inundated. So where would we all live?

Last summer, we experienced Australia's worst bushfire season in history. Many people were killed and many homes destroyed. Entire cities were blanketed in dangerous smoke for months and more than 1 billion animals perished. Forests burned on an unprecedented scale, including rainforests that had never burned before.

The best way to mitigate this looming worldwide disaster - and it is doable - is to rapidly replace fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) with non-polluting and renewable sources of energy whilst simultaneously reducing other sources of greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible from transport, industry and agriculture.

The other major threat to Victoria's environmental health in terms of maintaining clean air and water as well as storing carbon to mitigate the further deterioration of our climate, is land clearing and deforestation. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with around two thirds of it having already been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants. These had provided habitat for our unique and diverse animals, birds, insects and reptiles. Over 700 of our native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are consequently now under threat.

Since a significant proportion of habitat clearing takes place on private land, it would make sense for the Victorian Government to establish a sufficiently large "revolving fund" to purchase, restore and then resell private land for conservation. The fund would be "revolving" because some of the money could be returned to it once the land had been restored and sold. Organisations like Trust for Nature and Bush Heritage have demonstrated that the purchasing and restoration of privately owned habitat remnants is most beneficial for the recovery of threatened species.

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 our habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals and plants. Logging is further exacerbating this already serious problem.

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. Why can VicForests be above the law for the next decade? Setting an end date as late as 2030 is pointless anyway, as by then there will be almost nothing left to log, and most species who were dependent on this vanished habitat will have perished.

Without forests the quality of our air and water will rapidly decline, and this will not be readily reversible as new trees take years to grow and initially use more resources than older trees would.

It is therefore obvious that if we are to prevent this needless ecological catastrophe, Victoria should immediately transition out of native forest logging, with sufficient financial support for workers and the industry. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimates this would actually save the Victorian budget \$190 million. So why the delay?

Furthermore, our environment would also benefit enormously from our government actually delivering on the grassland reserves that we were promised by 2020. 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.

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.

As well as the solutions already identified, I therefore think that it would further benefit Victoria's environment if the committee gave serious consideration to a "Save our Species" fund for Victoria with substantial new government funding to restore threatened species in Victoria, as well as public information outlining in what way this funding will benefit the conservation of threatened species. I understand that New South Wales has a detailed Save Our Species program, with a dedicated \$100 million in funding. Surely we can at least match that.

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 have actually seen the significant deterioration of Victoria's environment because these laws allow for intervention to protect the environment to be at the sole discretion of the relevant Minister, and In practice successive Victorian Environment Ministers have chosen not to use these powers because it is not politically expedient to do so.

The remediation of this glaring flaw, so that intervention to protect our threatened environmental resources from damaging overdevelopment was compulsory would give the legislation real teeth. It is long overdue.

Although right now the Victorian Government is grappling with COVID-19, the threats to our natural environment are still just as urgent. We all depend on a healthy world to thrive, so we need to tackle the health crisis of COVID-19 as well as simultaneously protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems.

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

Thank you for reading this submission, and I am happy for it to be made public.

Yours sincerely,

Vivien Smith



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