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To: The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au

RE: Submission into the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria

Thank you on behalf of the Surf Coast Energy Group (SCEG) for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria.

Mass species extinction is a global phenomenon and sadly here in Victoria we are very much part of that planetary trend. The fact that it continues to accelerate should be cause for all of us to have a serious rethink. One thing is obvious, tweaking things here and there aren't going to produce the changes required.

Across Victoria 'Trust for Nature' states we are losing around 4000ha to land clearing each year in Victoria.

Here in the Surf Coast and across the City of Greater Geelong we can see these key drivers in action with urban sprawl and land clearing continuing at pace.

The lack of systems thinking at a planning level where the fixation is on 'Growth' means there is also a cascade of impacts. For instance, over extraction of water by Barwon Water in the past has already caused enormous damage at Gerangamete so we can readily see what misuse looks like. Worryingly, Barwon Water has stated they cannot guarantee clean water supply past 2029. This is a problem when climate change and urban sprawl are acting in concert to produce less rain and greater demand!

Further afield other contributing drivers include timber extraction, and the introduction of invasive species.

Importantly, whilst climate change is amplifying these threats, it is not the root cause of the problem; rather it is the sheer scale of human enterprise which is massively beyond what the planet can support that is responsible. It is precisely why Earth Overshoot Day will be held on August 22nd this year. Earth Overshoot Day is simply a mathematical marker showing humanity when in the calendar year our global economy moves from Sustainable to Unsustainable. Planetary indicators that make this equation plain are legion and include: biodiversity decline across the board, eg. commercial fish species fished at full or over capacity, invertebrate decline (by species and biomass), expanding extreme plastic waste problem, global freshwater availability in decline, ocean acidification increasing, transgression of the Nitrogen cycle, Covid 19, depletion of various non-renewable resources including fossil fuels and of course climate change. All of these global problems are also Victoria's problems. We urgently need a conversation about change, moving from a Consumer Society to a Conserver Society and from a GDP growth Economy to a Gross State Happiness Economy; one that is premised on sustainability and resilience.

The shocks that are now locked into the system, as shown by C19, are going to be pushing back harder and faster at a global economic system that pretends the environment is a subset of the economy. Unsustainability on a finite planet is an endgame with the end now in sight. The choice is ours.

In the meantime, as a matter of urgency, SCEG supports Environmental Justice Australia with the following initiatives (with additional input shown in italics by us on points 6 and 7):

1. Resource and implement the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is the centrepiece of Victoria's biodiversity conservation legislation. Reforms last year have "refreshed and modernised" the Act, updating the objectives, adding a new duty for public authorities, and introducing new conservation tools. However, none of these reforms will be worth the paper that they're written on if they are not properly implemented.
2. Make sure our nature protection laws are climate ready. The past summer's devastating bushfires demonstrate the terrible impact that climate change can have on our wonderful natural places and wildlife. Climate change presents a massive challenge to Victorian ecosystems. Failing to address climate change stops our laws working effectively. Climate adaptation must be a part of our legal frameworks.
3. Improve compliance and enforcement with our environmental laws. A significant change was made last year when, following a damning review of timber harvesting regulation in Victoria, the government established the Office of Conservation the Regulator. This move, while a welcome recognition that the implementation and enforcement of our nature protection laws needs to be improved, does not go far enough. We need an independent conservation regulator with a clear legislative foundation and all the legal powers needed to ensure Victoria's conservation laws are complied with.
4. Protect Victoria's precious wildlife. Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 is out of date and no longer meets community expectations when it comes to protecting our precious wildlife. It should be reformed to

make sure that it meets the Victorian community's expectations for how our valued wildlife will be protected and preserved for future generations.

5. Prevent the harmful impacts of new development. While the Morrison government is in a hurry to handover responsibilities under our national environmental law - the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act - to state governments, we know that Victorian laws are not fit for purpose. Victoria's planning laws and environmental impact assessment laws need to be brought up to date to make sure that infrastructure projects properly account for their impacts on Victoria's biodiversity before we even think about handing over responsibilities.

6. Stop the drivers of ecosystem decline. Nature protection laws should be a safety net. We need to address the pressure on Victorian biodiversity protection laws by removing key drivers of ecosystem decline *such as endless urban sprawl and facing the fact that there are Limits To Growth*, native forest logging, unsustainable use of water resources, and the impact of invasive species. Stopping native forest logging sooner rather than later, more sustainable water resource management, and new fit for purpose invasive species management legislation are needed if ecosystem decline is to be turned around.

7. Boost ecosystem restoration. Nature protection laws alone will not be enough – our laws must also guide and encourage the restoration of Victoria's ecosystems. *This is particularly important as local community needs active, legislative encouragement by the State Government to get involved. A key example is the aspiration of a number of groups within the local community of Torquay to create a Community Woodland Trust to restore the Highly Endangered Bellarine Yellowgum Woodland associated with Spring Creek. We will need the assistance of Government to get there, and our pathway should be fostered so that it can serve as a model for other communities.*

With climate change already having a terrible impact on Victorian flora and fauna, the challenge is urgent. Whether it be on public land or private land, our land management must be subject to appropriate obligations to ensure that ecological processes and natural assets are there for future generations to enjoy.

Strong nature protection laws will provide the backbone for a healthier future for Victoria's ecosystems, ensuring the people, places and wildlife we love can thrive for generations to come.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Yours sincerely,

Graeme Stockton

(Chairperson on behalf of the SCEG committee)