

Submission – Inquiry into Ecosystem decline in Victoria

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

Submitted By - Melanie Attard

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My name is Melanie. I live in Frankston Victoria. Among other things, I am a volunteer with over 20 years' experience rescuing, rehabilitating, releasing and educating around, local native wildlife. I have seen first-hand the negative impacts of industrialisation, habitat loss, bushfire, pollution, and climate change on our native animals. We see many native animals breeding out of season as the climate warms, and their natural food sources unavailable out of season, we see starvation amongst the young as the parents struggle to find enough food to feed them. We see increasing storm, flood, and bushfire events impacting our wildlife. We have seen heat stress events killing off birds and possums in ever increasing numbers each and every summer. Ringtail Possums, Brushtail Possums, Rainbow Lorikeets, Eastern Rosellas, Magpies, Kookaburras, Silvergulls, just to name a few. Native wildlife needs healthy habitats to survive and thrive. We see starving penguins who cannot find food in turbid, overfished waters. We see tangled up seals, pelicans, gulls, gannets, darters and numerous other species drowning in humans rubbish.

The negative impacts of industrialisation, over development, habitat loss, logging, bushfire, pollution, and climate change, on our native animals is unbearable. In the suburbs, we see possums and birds moving into sheds, roller doors, wall crevices, and building sites, desperate for a tree hollow to sleep or breed in. Around 80% of our native animals are dependent on tree hollows to sleep and/or breed. Large hollows are disappearing at an alarming rate, the species that need these hollows will simply stop breeding and decline in numbers, becoming unviable as a future species. It takes at least 80 years for a hollow to start forming in a tree, it can take hundreds of years for a hollow large enough to accommodate a powerful owl to form.

We were inundated with hundreds of ringtail possums in one single incident in Summer 2019 at Somers, Western Port Bay, beach foreshore after a record heat wave. I walked that beach with numerous other dedicated volunteers for hours in 40-degree heat searching for survivors. The possums were so dehydrated and desperate, that they lethally drank sea water. I picked up one poor little lone ringtail possum sitting soaked, as the water lapped across the sand. We managed to rehabilitate a few of the survivors, who were later released back home into the foreshore vegetation, but our wildlife cannot tolerate such conditions year after year. Mentally, people cannot tolerate such devastation year after year.

I have carried out post bushfire search and rescue as a volunteer. I have seen the devastation, the loss, the suffering. I have seen the shock and fear in the eyes of the locals who have lost loved ones and homes. They see hope in the form of a koala salvaged from the ashes. Many of these animals do not make it. We are simply there to assist in getting these animals pain relief and as peaceful a death as possible.

We have a nation in trauma, and species pushed to the brink of extinction after Black Summer Bushfires, and still the Victorian Government allows Vicforests, a corrupt corporation under the State Government, to smash and burn our forests. What a terrible and unforgivable shame. Vicforests were found guilty in Federal Court this year of numerous breaches of environmental protection laws, but still they bulldoze. The Government now aims to rewrite laws to allow the destruction to continue. This is not sustainable, and it is certainly not ethical. Logging must be shut down now. Ecotourism is a really great viable alternative, with many positives including local jobs and flora and fauna protection.

For millions of Australians climate change is not a distant future threat but a dangerous reality right now. In the last decade we have suffered what might be the worst drought in Australia's history, ravaging our farmers and pushing the Murray-Darling river system to its limit. This drought – exacerbated by climate change – also created the dry conditions that fuelled the devastating bushfires last summer. Lives were lost, rural communities destroyed, and pristine areas of bush were lost meaning three billion wild animals were killed or displaced. All this has happened after an average global increase of only 1.1 degree Celsius. Without curbing our emission from fossil fuels and habitat destruction track record, we are on track for several degrees C of warming by the end of the century. Everything we have lost this summer cannot be in vain – we need to stop building polluting fossil fuel projects and clearing habitat, that are driving the climate crisis and threatening our environment, and we need much greater protection and investment in native flora and fauna ecosystems.

Climate Grief is real and it is happening now, all around the world as we mourn the increasing loss of our green spaces, healthy waterways and wildlife, as they disappear forever into extinction. Climate grief comes in many forms. There is the bereavement-like grief and trauma when a climate change-enhanced “natural disaster” hits you or your close ones. Think of Australia after the catastrophic Black Summer fires. Then there is transitional grief: a growing awareness that things are changing, and feelings of grief and sadness because of the many losses involved. The range of things (and creatures) that people mourn

for is wide: loss of human, animal and plant life, but also loss of identities, beliefs, and lifestyles.

Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation. One example of economic opportunity and ecotourism is birdwatching. Birdwatching is big business. Victoria's natural wetlands and reserves should provide an opportunity for bird enthusiasts to add some much-needed boost to flagging tourist economies. Tourism Australia's national visitor survey, to the year ending 2019, has for the first time included bird watching as part of its data. Remarkably, it shows there were greater numbers who travelled for bird watching purposes as visited the Great Barrier Reef. The statistics indicate 886,000 domestic tourists went bird watching in 2019, many including overnight stays in their itineraries. This is just another example of how important bird life can be to an economy. The number of domestic bird watching tourists presents a huge opportunity to Western Port Bay, which is blessed with stunning native waterbirds, many unique to our country and our region. When COVID-19 restrictions ease, our regional economies will particularly welcome tourism. We need to focus on a sustainable economic recovery and we can see this as an opportunity for change and growth. The old industrial ways of overconsuming and destruction, to our peril, need to end. There is little if any infrastructure needed to attract a steady portion of the bird watching community. The assets are already here. Victoria is incredibly blessed by the variety of birdlife we have.

We must end Duck hunting in Victoria too if we are serious about protecting our native animals. What a joke, to say the Government cares about protecting wildlife, but allows the slaughter of native waterbirds each and every year to placate a few hundred shooters. In the United States, bird watching is a \$41 billion industry.

The slaughter of kangaroos for meat is another horrific hypocrisy. These native animals deserve protection, not being shot at, with any live pouch joeys having their heads smashed against a rock or car bulbar, and any "at foot" young hopping in terror away to die a terribly slow death of starvation, or being eaten by predators.

The cull permits DELWP issue each and every year are yet another example of a Government with no clue about humanely and sustainably living with wildlife. Government have no right to sign a piece of paper, collect a small fee, and order the death of thousands and thousands of native animals every year. At this rate there will be nothing much left to protect. I think the Government needs to take a good hard look at the way they have been conducting themselves in relation to wildlife management. Things need to change, before it is too late and we say goodbye to even more species, forever.

Local Government Councils around the world have declared a climate emergency, and are lobbying and taking direct action on habitat and species destruction. Around the world people are calling on their elected leaders to declare a climate emergency and initiate a society-wide mobilisation. As at 5th August 2020, Climate Emergency Declarations have been

made by elected leaders in 1,759 jurisdictions and local governments, covering 820 million citizens globally.

I have studied Horticulture, and Conservation and Land Management, worked as a ranger, and now work in Education at a University. I install nest boxes for displaced wildlife. Volunteers are picking up the pieces. Wildlife is doing it tough, whether it is in the suburbs or out in the bush, ecosystems are in decline and the planet is warming to extremely dangerous levels.

Victoria's unique and threatened ecosystems and wildlife need much better protection and funding. Aboriginal Law needs to be respected and followed. Cultural burning is a great example of how we can work together. Logging in forests must be stopped. I expect the Victorian Government to implement better laws and much stronger protections to halt the steep decline of threatened flora and fauna.

The extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts, is catastrophic and irreversible. The legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species is inadequate. If it were adequate this inquiry would not need to be held! Government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems are also inadequate, again, if it were then this inquiry would not need to be held as there would be no decline in Victoria's unique and threatened ecosystems.

Legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts; is also inadequate. More needs to be done to protect our flora and fauna. Government needs to work with Aboriginal people and learn about the best practices that they have used for 100,000 years. Without cultural burning in the black summer bushfire zones, some of those habitats will never recover from the devastation. There is great opportunity to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria.

We need to recover from Climate Change and the COVID 19 economic doom and gloom with innovation in the form of sustainable jobs. The impacts of native forest logging and land clearing is a key driver of biodiversity, threatened species and ecosystem decline. This is well documented in science. We can simply no longer continue to take and destroy from nature. Climate change is creating catastrophic events such as flood, drought and bushfire. These are forecast to increase in occurrence and severity. The planet is warming up, climate change is upon us. We are in the midst of a mass extinction. Urgent action is required. We need to stop the destruction. We need to allow mother nature to heal. We need to work together, caring for the land. The catastrophic impacts of the 2019/2020 bushfires which wiped out over 1 billion native animals, and over 70% of forests in East Gippsland alone are devastating. The evidence is clear, we must take swift action to protect what we have left, and restore what we can.

