

Jack Nicholls

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

To the members of the Environment and Planning Committee,

I have a Masters of Environment from the University of Melbourne, and I know a bit about the details of our ecosystem crises – percentage declines, hectares burned, etc. - but you will get other submissions that explain that better. What I want to make you understand, is what it feels like to live in a world that is dying.

I am still young, but I've seen the change in my lifetime. There are fewer insects around now, have you noticed? Fewer fish in the rivers. Our porch light used to flicker in the wings of bogong moths, they're all gone now. I'd guess that is going to have a cascade effect up the food chain. I'm sure the entomologists can tell you.

I am in my thirties, and I think that my cohort was one of the earliest to study the greenhouse effect and extinctions in primary school. It upset me, but in the 1990s our teachers told us that our leaders were fixing it, like they were fixing the hole in the ozone layer, and anyway, the worst impacts wouldn't happen for a hundred years.

But we haven't fixed it, and climate impacts like the collapse of the Great Barrier Reef, that were predicted to happen at the end of the century, are happening *right now*. Farmers are in despair. Bushfires are out of control. Australia's ecosystem, the most fragile among all the continents, is dying. It's dying like my father died of dementia: slowly, with moments of good news where we could pretend things were getting better, before another test, another fall, showed that we had taken another irrevocable step towards losing what we had loved.

The destruction of Australia's environment is the defining shadow on my life. Our education system taught me that our society would collapse if we did not address the extinction and climate crises, then pushed me out into a world where it was clear our leaders would not address them. The scale of our mismanagement has alienated me from the institutions that hold our country together. It has impacted my decisions about starting a family. It has made me apathetic about work, and cynical about democracy. It's made me cry at night, as I cycle through anxiety and rage. I try to be kind, humane, and a responsible citizen. But all my good qualities are tempered by this well of anger and resentment – because I don't have hope for our future. And I know that hundreds of thousands of Australians feel the same. More every year.

Australians are a wonderful group, but we are not specially gifted, in a way our ancestors were not. We are not magically better than the people who ran the Soviet Union, or the Roman Empire – people that we now pity or mock in our history books. Like them, we are smart, earnest people trapped in our institutions. Every culture has its own madness, and our culture's madness is our pretence that we can carry on living the Australian dream in a country losing its fish, its birds, its insects and its fresh water.

I know that's a lie. You know that's a lie. Our children know that's a lie. We all know that it's a lie, but we are continuing to shuffle towards oblivion because we lack the imagination to do anything else. Because decent, hard-working leaders like yourself have become convinced that there is no other choice. That fundamental change to the post-war structure of our community is too hard.

So we tinker around the edges, and sometimes it helps. We can do a lot more tinkering to improve Victoria's ecosystems. The Federal Government could start applying the EPBC Act in the way it was meant to be used – to protect our country. We could plant more trees. We could take control of our own recycling, we could put more money to restoring ecosystems. But we have been doing these piece-meal responses for my entire life, and yet somehow things don't get better. Because what we have been doing is like touching up the paint in a house *while it is on fire*.

If you want to really protect Victoria's ecosystems, you have to speak out about what I hope you already know, in your heart, is true. We need to radically restructure our society and our economy. We have to phase out all fossil fuels. We need to plan for the full life-cycle of our objects and not send our waste to pile up in garbage mounds offshore. We need to either reverse thirty years of deregulation, or pass and enforce laws that will actually serve as a deterrent to those businesses that pump pollution into our land, air and water and leave us to clean up their mess.

This isn't about going back to the stone age. It's about building a high-tech, communal and optimistic future that is better than the septic stagnation of the present. And that will happen naturally if you unleash our country's innovative capacity, but you have to be serious. You have to change our relationship to the land, you have to explain it to every Victorian that this is the number one priority, and it will be until we fix it.

Until then, young people are not going to be okay. Last year I sat in a park with a teenager. She was crying about the state of our environment, and she said, "I grew up in a world that was clean and healthy, and I woke up one day and realised that all is gone." She was distraught.

But she grew up in the 2000s, so I know that the world she was mourning wasn't really all that clean, or healthy. In one generation, Australians had forgotten what their land was supposed to look like. And then of course I thought, what had we already lost that I didn't even recognise? That's what scared me – this shifting baseline. What a young woman might say in thirty years, sitting amidst parched dirt, "I remember growing up with foxes and possums scavenging in the bins, and now you don't see them at all!"

I want to start fixing Australia before our children forget what it used to look, smell and sound like, even more than we already have. I want to start fixing Australia, so I can feel okay about even having children. I want to start fixing Australia, so that our art, science, beauty and wonder are remembered by our descendants. Because I can promise you, if we don't get our shit together to deal with the greatest environmental crisis humanity has ever faced, nobody who comes after will care about any of our other achievements. We'll be remembered as the people who killed the land, the people who lost the koala, the people who destroyed themselves because it was 'too hard' to do anything else. That will be the only legacy our descendants remember.

It is hard, I know it's so hard. And for years, real change has been dismissed as unimaginable by people without enough imagination. But the pandemic has shown that people are willing to change

their lives dramatically for the greater good. *IF* we think it will work. *IF* we think there is a plan to get us out of this nightmare.

Please rise to the occasion. Please imagine something better.

Yours sincerely,

Jack Nicholls