

Submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

From: The Australian Conservation Foundation Community, Bendigo District, & Bendigo and District Environment Council (BDEC)

To: The Environment and Planning Committee: ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au

Date: 19th August 2020

Bendigo District ACF and BDEC acknowledge that we live, work and play on the stolen land of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, who have an ongoing connection to country. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that First Nations peoples around the world are leading the call for climate justice.

Contributors to this submission:

John Land, Pam Land

Barbara Lomas

Wendy Radford, John Bardsley

Karen Thomas

Colin Lambie

Ian McCaw

John Lindner

Stanislaw Pelczynski, Barbara Pelczynska

Brenton Rittburger

Stuart Fraser

Colin Holland

Jenny Grant

Vyonne McLelland-Howe

Marie Bonne

Mel Abel

Don Leversha

Bendigo District ACF now has a membership of 349, and BDEC a membership of 16. This submission has been approved by the membership of both organizations.

Bendigo ACF and BDEC thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

In short we conclude:

1. Significant and widespread ecosystem **decline is occurring** in Central Victoria
2. The **legislative framework** to protect, maintain and restore habitat and biodiversity **is weak**, and the political will to use such legislation as exists is even weaker.
3. **Laws must be strengthened to safeguard our intact ecosystems**, protect the critical areas people and wildlife need to survive, tackle our most pressing threats, and create a framework for 30-35% of native vegetation cover across Victoria, and decrease carbon emissions.
4. **Immediate action** must: (a) implement the recommendations of the June 2019 Victorian Environment Assessment Council Report on the Central West Investigation; (b) cease all native forest logging, and salvage logging, and hasten the transition to plantations; (c) increase funding to maintain and protect National Parks to 1% of the State budget; (d) fund bushfire recovery assessment and management teams.
5. Public authorities and the general public must be made aware of their new **duty to consider biodiversity conservation** and the objectives of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

(a) The extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity...

According to the Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report, most biodiversity indicators are poor and trending downwards. Evidence of serious biodiversity decline in North and Central Victoria has been documented by scientists and the citizenry alike. A Land and Water Australia report from 2009 noted "There was a significant, systematic and dramatic decline in species richness of all woodland-dependent species, and of insectivorous and nectivorous species, respectively, in agricultural landscapes of north-central Victoria between 2002/03 and 2006/07. This marked decline occurred in nearly all landscapes."¹ Our contributors provide anecdotal evidence that this decline has continued, and in some cases leads to local extinctions. In addition, we do not know whether the extinction debt has been fully realized, especially in areas of medium and high vegetation cover.

The following personal stories corroborate scientific evidence:

John and Pam Land live on a 100 acre property near **Neilborough** 25 km north of Bendigo.

They have kept records for around 30 years. They note that "Yellow Robins have declined; we used to have three pairs on our 100 acres, but now are lucky to find just one. Numbers of spotted and Striated Pardalotes have declined as well. Numbers of most Honeyeaters have also declined although the numbers of White-eared Honeyeaters have remained fairly constant....the Gilbert's Whistlers that we knew of in the Whipstick and Kamarooka areas have gone. Much of our understory has gone over the last ten years or so, which has made nesting for some species unsatisfactory. Many have not raised young for several years. Magpies, Grey Currawongs, Grey Butcherbirds, White-winged Choughs and Ravens seem to be doing well! In particular, we have noticed a severe decline in the number of *Grevillea alpina*. There are fewer Golden everlastings and *Acacia brachybotrya* too."

They had not seen a Tawny-crowned Honeyeater since 2010, a Painted Buttonquail since 2012, a Brush Bronze wing or Dusky Moorhen or Tawny Frogmouth since 2015, and the last time they saw a Purple-crowned Lorikeet was April 2016. The Land's conclude: "Generally the recent dry years, the excessive numbers of kangaroos, increased number of neighbours (who all seem to have free range cats), roaming goats and foxes, have had a sad impact on our ecosystems."

Barbara Lomas lives at Golden Gully, Golden Square, just south of Bendigo central.

She describes her place as "normal sized suburban garden with a mixture of deciduous and native plants. Regular visitors include silver eyes, New Holland honeyeaters, various wattle birds, magpies, crested pigeons, fairy wrens, mudlarks, sparrows and a few blackbirds." But she chronicles a pest species that causes damage. "Over time the number of Indian Mynah birds increased from one or two to a flock of about 30. By then we realised that most of the other birds had disappeared." They pretty successfully eradicated the Mynahs and asked their neighbours to help. Now "the other birds have returned although not in the same numbers. We have put up nesting boxes and attracted red rump parrots and lorikeets....While we no longer have many Mynahs at our property or in our street, we see them in large numbers elsewhere in Bendigo and know they are causing a lot of trouble for native birds.

Wendy Radford and John Bardsley live at **South Mandurang**, 13 km south of the Bendigo CBD on a 10 acre unimproved farm property purchased in 1998.

¹ Dr. J. Radford, Land and Water Australia, Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Program Final Report, April 2009, page 3

Their records show:

Disappearance of Red-browed firetail finches, Black faced cuckoo shrikes, Black shouldered kites, Yellow Tufted honey eaters, Olive backed orioles, Clamorous reed warbler, Scarlet robin, Hooded robin, Black-fronted dotterel, Australian owl nightjar, Swamp harrier, Darter

Decline in populations of Eastern Rosellas (supplanted with Crimson Rosellas), Spotted pardalote, Rufus whistler, White-throated treecreeper, Noisy friarbird, Brown falcon, Yellow tailed black cockatoos, Tawny frogmouth, White winged cough, brown snakes, frogs, and annual rainfall.

Increase in populations of Noisy miner, Indian miner, Grey currawong, White eared honeyeater, Australian raven, Galah, Eastern grey kangaroo

Persistence of several echidnas over the 21 year period

They note that “during our 21 years at South Mandurang we have witnessed the removal of much good quality habitat for housing, road works and community facilities. The consequent fragmentation of flora and corridors of habitat and the increased dry due to climate change, probably accounts for the disappearance or decline of those species dependent on more dense/thicket vegetation, and the over-abundance of more aggressive species.”

Karen Thomas lives at **Mandurang** and is the volunteer who runs the Brush-tailed Phascogale Recovery Program for Bendigo Field Naturalists. She writes “In the time that I have been working with the phascogales there has been not enough time and data to say they are declining....wherever we put boxes we find phascogales. This year the numbers in some areas were down, and in others it increased.”

She continues: “What I fear is the future impact on the populations by the pressures of urban increase ... increased development adjacent to forest areas, increased predation by cats, foxes, increased use of natural areas by human populations...increase in tracks and erosion² of sediments into waterways, loss of waterholes from sediment fill, and so on... loss of more tree canopy in private property, loss of corridors...stealing wood from regional parks, disturbance of surfaces by detectors – the perennial problems with population increase.”

Colin Lambie lives in **Strathdale** and writes “I note the extent of bike tracks through the bush I walk in at the end of Cousins Street, Strathdale.” He provides a nearmap image “showing the many tracks criss crossing the bush and the erosion in top right of the image...I believe the situation has got worse over the last 10 years.”

Ian McCaw of **East Bendigo** notes the “decline of the insect population, particularly with regard to butterflies, dragonflies, stick insects and bugs in general – to the extent that sighting of the first three examples is becoming a rarity in my suburban neighbourhood. The frequency of hearing frog sounds is also on the decline. The discovery of a puddle or pond containing tadpoles is now only a childhood memory.”

Stuart Fraser, of Strathdale, who has been a professional bee keeper for 40+ years, supports this view that insect life has drastically declined not only in Central Victoria, but in the North East and Pyrenees too. He notes the decline of the Bogong moth in particular, suggesting that the moth is now not apparent at all in the landscapes in which he works. This he attributes to the widespread use of pesticides. He comments that it is a disaster for pollination of native plants.

Stanislaw Pelczynski and Barbara Pelczynska kept records at Bennetts Road, **Junortoun** from 1990-2008. They lived on a 5 acre block, one of 30 covenanted properties. Stan writes “this predominantly Box part of Box-Ironbark Forest ecological vegetation class was very rich in both flora and fauna.”³ He continues, “Over the 18 years we lived there we watched the progressive decline in species populations and, in the case of swamp wallabies, tuans, Mclvor Spider orchids and possibly sun orchids, to local extinctions the causes of which were:-

² Brush tailed Phascogales, or Tuans, require unbroken scent trails in the forest in order to detect and impregnate a mate. The males live for one year; the females for two. If scent trails are disturbed by a proliferation of tracks, erosion and sediment flow, the males may not find their mate and will likely die before producing the next generation. Their procreation is very fragile in a forest on the edge of a suburban area.

³ Stan continues: “The Flora Reserve abutting Hodges Lane, Bennett’s Road and O’Keefe Trail was bought in the early 1990’s with money raised by the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club, the Spring Gully Environmental Group, Bendigo and District Environment Council and the Strathfieldsaye Council, and then covenanted by Trust for Nature, which is a testimony” to the value of the rich biodiversity of the area.

- Road kills
- Cats, dogs, foxes and feral bees
- Population growth and consequent new subdivisions
- People's attitude to the natural environment (introduction of exotic plants and environmental weeds)

Stan concludes: "Our experience is just one example of a small local extinction and degradation of the environment, but it is not an isolated example as it represents what is occurring in other places, and the cumulative impact of which has drastic consequences on Australia's biodiversity and thence on our ecosystem services and climate."

Don Leversha, also of **Junortoun**, corroborates the previous observations with a current update. On August 10, 2020 he wrote: "My one hectare block is a good example of what climate change has brought about. It used to have large numbers of Melaleuca decussate – totem poles, which require a certain amount of moisture in the soil. More than half have died, along with a number of large eucalypts. I don't see any melaleuca seedlings! Native wax flower has disappeared along with several species of orchid and most Grevillea alpina. Thanks in part to large numbers of Noisy Miners I now do not see any small birds. ..have not seen other bird species, such as tawny frogmouth, pardalotes, wattle birds or white winged chuffs for a number of years. Don't hear frogs very often either."

John Lindner has lived in **White Hills**, a northern suburb of Bendigo, for 27 years (1993 to 2020).

Record of evidence – nature diary observations

John writes: "I can point to some factors which indicate decline in ecosystem integrity around here:

- Spread of Bridal Creeper along the Bendigo-Echuca railway easement
- Spread of Gazania Daises on any vacant land
- Fewer birds of prey sightings e.g. Black-shouldered Kite, Australian Hobby, Brown Goshawk
- 'Explosion' of certain large bird species' populations e.g. Crested Pigeon, Galah
- Continued and continuous loss of big trees in and around the urban area – the big trees which year after year flower regularly and feed thousands of birds as is happening at the moment all over Bendigo, especially with Red Ironbark and lorikeets of various species

Colin Holland of Bendigo submitted anecdotal observations of **Loddon River aquatic life** and river flows from the Upper Loddon River Catchment area, Guildford Region, 1960's to the present. He writes:

"Initially river aquatic life, platypus, water rats and fish populations were abundant, mainly introduced species, alongside native river blackfish in the upper reaches above Vaughan. Seasonal flows were very regular and although some summer flows ceased almost all decent pools held good water levels until the next season. First noticed a decline in fish populations in the mid 80's and noted that the small river shrimps had disappeared. Smaller creeks in the area feeding the Loddon [showed biodiversity decline] e.g. Limestone Creek, seemed to have lost its population of native Common Galaxias.

From the 70's herbicide (2-4-D and 2-4-5-T) were sprayed by farmers, Lands Department and Forest Commission in the catchment areas. I wonder about the shrimp's disappearance! In some areas cattle still have free access to riverbanks.

Ground water has also suffered with some springs on creek lines being capped and flows extracted by bottled water companies.

There has been an increase in some native riparian vegetation as CMA's have removed Crack Willows. River flows declined from the mid 90's, with droughts and overall decrease in rainfall and usage pressure."

(a) ...and the likely impact on people, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate impacts

Our members, and many others in the community, are angry and distressed about this decline. They grieve the loss of landscape, habitat and the creatures living therein. They realize their physical, mental and spiritual health is intimately connected with the health of

the ecosystems upon which we are all dependent. They worry about the future for their children and grandchildren because they realize that biodiversity decline heralds our species decline. They are frustrated about government inaction and lack of leadership.

“When we occupied this country some 240 years ago the balance between biodiversity and land care had been faultlessly maintained by the indigenous inhabitants for the previous sixty or so thousand years. In the mere twinkling of an eye we have changed this forever and so much has gone that can’t be replaced.” (Ian McCaw)

“Addressing the issues that cause our more frequent droughts and the changing climate conditions and protecting and valuing our waterways are vital.” (Colin Holland)

“Victoria must take urgent action to decrease our carbon emissions if we are to halt further decline in Victoria’s biodiversity. Legislation to protect important natural areas from expanding urbanisation should be enhanced and not be delayed.” (Jenny Grant)

(b) *The adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria’s environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;*

Whilst the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act has proven inadequate to maintain and protect Victoria’s biodiversity, we note that it has not been properly used and funded, and thus could be considered to have facilitated biodiversity decline rather than halt it. It has been recently altered to allow it to work a little better. The common assessment method aligns it with the Federal EPBC Act which should make for ease of collaboration.⁴

But that is a problem too as the Federal Act is not used or funded properly either. The Auditor General’s current scathing report suggests “offsets to approve developments suggest usage is worsening impact on endangered species, not reducing it.”⁵

A fundamental flaw in such legislation is that it only swings into action once a species/process/ecosystem is assessed as endangered or threatened. It does not address the continuing decline of local biodiversity not considered significant enough to be ‘listed’. Today’s common species will be tomorrow’s vulnerable and endangered species, and increasingly so according to 250 of Australia’s scientists. **“While there are more than 1800 plants and animals that are formally listed as threatened with extinction, it’s clear this is an underestimate. In reality many more face extinction.. ..Laws must safeguard our intact ecosystems and protect the critical areas people and wildlife need to survive and tackle our most pressing threats.”**⁶

In summary, the **legislative framework is weak, and the political will to use it even weaker**. In addition, the public is generally unaware of how to go about using the laws to protect areas/ecosystems that they know are of great value.

(c) *The adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems*

⁴ Park Watch No.281 June 2020 p.20 ‘the new FFG Act will ... use the subcategories – ‘extinct’, ‘extinct in the wild’, ‘critically endangered’, ‘endangered’, ‘vulnerable’, and in the case of a taxon of fish, ‘conservation dependent’

⁵ The Guardian, 27/06/20 “Morrison Government urged to fix flawed environmental offsets leaving threatened species at risk.”

⁶ <https://www.envirolawspenletter.com.au/>

Programs aimed at restoring or maintaining biodiversity are chronically underfunded, or not funded at all by State government. Successive State of Victoria's Environment Reports indicate this. Contributors to this submission are acutely aware of this.

Pam and John Land write: "We had a look at Parks Victoria (PV) Annual Financial Report, which disproportionately contains numerous motherhood and vague statements with much management-speak. It was extremely difficult to find out what percentage of Parks Vic's budget is used for the control of feral animals and weeds overall, let alone park by park. There seems to be a huge proportion of its budget devoted to fire management and it would be worthwhile knowing how much of the fire management activities threaten ecosystems, habitats and species."

John Lindner concludes his contribution: "The only weapon we have is to fortify and strengthen the World of Nature is our National Park system...It is under siege on every front – inadequate resources and staffing, public apathy and disinterest, developers, money-makers etc.etc."

Karen Thomas is the key organizer of the Bendigo Phascogale Nest Box Program, auspiced by the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club since the 1990s, and run by community volunteers. At present the program has 400+ functioning boxes installed and maintained in Bendigo's Regional and National Parks. This has contributed to sustaining the populations of Phascogales and Sugar Gliders in our parks, as a study reported in *Ecological Management & Restoration* suggests: "The nest boxes we studied had been in place for 10-25 years. We found that 57% were used by the Brush-tailed Phascogale and 37% were used by the Sugar Glider in the year of census. These are very high levels of use by target species, which reflect the appropriateness of the installed nest box designs and the paucity of natural tree hollows in our study area."⁷

Government funding for this successful program has been, in total, \$2,000 for the production of nest boxes. City of Greater Bendigo provided \$1,000. Otherwise, all costs for building, installing and maintaining the boxes over a 25 year period have been self-funded by the program volunteers themselves.

This is just one example of the failure by government to capitalize on the enthusiasm and knowledge of community members keen to assist with the maintenance of biodiversity in their areas. It is also a failure to work with local communities to build the data from monitoring programs which would inform future management.

Jenny Grant, Bendigo resident, has been involved with many community conservations initiatives, like the Project Hindmarsh tree planting program run by Hindmarsh Landcare, for over 20 years. She writes:

"To protect natural ecosystems from further decline more funding and support needs to be given to Landcare Groups, Friends Groups, Nature Clubs and education and environmental groups, schools, and Parks Victoria. As a more recent member of Friends of Kooyoora State Park I noted the positive connections with developing indigenous management partnerships, but progress was slow through delays in getting a permanent Ranger. Support is needed at Kooyoora for weed control (wheel cactus), feral animal control (goats) and mapping the unique biodiversity of species in the area as well as the important aboriginal sites."

Insecurity of funding is evidence of government short sightedness. The Healthy Parks, Healthy People program has funded a Community Engagement Officer for Bendigo parks, specifically because they are on the doorstep of a large urban population and as such need more 'feet on the ground' to ensure compliance. Yet this position is not secure and is again fighting for funding. ⁸

⁸ Brenton Rittburger, Convenor, Bendigo Family Nature Club, June '20

(d) 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

The State government must take **immediate action** to provide solutions by:

- Implementing, in their entirety, the recommendations of the June 2019 Victorian Environment Assessment Council Report on the Central West Investigation
- Increase funding to maintain and protect National Parks to 1% of the State budget from the current level of 0.5%
- Assist bushfire recovery by protecting unburnt refuges that may support threatened species, urgently funding on-ground surveys to assess where species are hanging on and then managing threats.
- Cease all native forest logging, including so-called 'salvage logging' and facilitate a swap to plantation forestry by abolishing Vic Forests and creating Vic Plantations. If this requires repudiation of the noxious Regional Forest Agreements with the Federal government then so be it. Their appalling record of allowing illegal logging under the EPBC Act should provide an out.

What then?

- Strengthen legislation to mandate action on all at risk species through the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act of 1988. The objective of this act is to "guarantee the survival of **all of Victoria's flora and fauna**." A review by the Auditor General in 2009 found that successive governments had all but abandoned implementing key parts of the act. In 2019 Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) found that nothing had changed since that review finding that "the FFG Act remains very poorly implemented with many of the legal measures to protect flora and fauna never used. Fewer than half of the 675 species listed under the act have Recovery Action Statements prepared despite this being a mandatory requirement of the FFG Act. Only one new Action Statement has been developed in the past year."⁹ The Minister and Department should be bound by law to carry out the objectives of the FFG Act using the provisions of the act fully.
- Seize the opportunity to connect with local groups and help fund worthy programs which study and map local diversity, share data as well as help implement practical action to maintain and restore biodiversity.
- For the **urban environment** "we need to encourage and provide network support and funding for urban community plantings, parks and reserves to protect and grow native species' and insects' safe havens and corridors."¹⁰ We need to "reduce speed limits and grow natives in street scapes"¹¹ We need legislation which encourages and protects "local governments to retain and improve natural ecosystems and to use locally indigenous species for planting in local areas."¹²

(e) Opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

We suggest that you hold extensive consultations with the Dja Dja Wurrung community of the Kulin nation, and that as traditional owners of the land on which we all exist, they will make essential contributions to the current inquiry.

(f) Any other related matters

We have known for many years what is necessary to protect biodiversity as this 2004 study shows:

"In mosaics with 10-20% cover, many species are in decline but this is enough habitat to support sustainable populations of some species. However, to support most species present in woodland regions in southern Australia an average of 30-35% native vegetation cover is necessary. It is not practical to have uniform cover of 30-35% on all farms and landscapes, but we need to ensure that areas with high vegetation cover are regularly interspersed among those where native vegetation has been heavily cleared."¹³

⁹ Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) e-bulletin, July 2020

¹⁰ Jenny Grant, Bendigo

¹¹ Sanislaw Pelczynski and Barbara Pelczynska

¹² National Strategy for Conservation of Biodiversity, 1996

¹³ 'How much habitat is enough?' Jim Radford, Andrew Bennett and Lindy MacRaild, School of Ecology and Environment, Deakin University, October 2004.

Governments must embrace long term aims and strategies to achieve this level of native vegetation cover, and work collaboratively with all elements in society.

We look forward to embracing the positive and practical changes this inquiry should bring about.

Yours faithfully,

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