



Community Submission for Parliamentary Inquiry into ecosystem decline

19/08/2020

To the Environment and Planning Committee,

Please consider this letter as a public submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria. I work for Goongerah Environment Centre (GECO), an environment and conservation organisation which has for many years been involved in a wide range of advocacy for wildlife and forests in East Gippsland threatened by native forest logging.

GECO has a long history of on-the-ground experience in surveying, documenting, and reporting on threatened species, which have resulted in the protection of some important areas of forests, as well as multiple submissions and reports into environmental legislation and reform, as well as independent research.

We have seen first-hand the impacts of logging on threatened species and declining ecosystems. Logging and land clearing have been identified as key drivers of decline in threatened flora and fauna species, as well as fragile ecosystems and older forest stands.

The failure of state and federal governments to protect threatened species and ensure logging practices are halted or restrained to protect threatened species habitat has greatly contributed to the ongoing crisis which is unfolding across Victoria's forested landscapes. State and federal regulatory frameworks have consistently failed to hold the state-owned logging company VicForests accountable to the law. It is often left to community groups taking legal action or using citizen science to protect critical areas of forest in the absence of proper environmental regulation and stronger laws. Swift and meaningful action must now be taken so forest dependent species are not only safeguarded from extinction, but that habitat restoration and protections ensure Victoria's unique and incredible wildlife thrives. Fundamental changes must be made by the Victorian government which result in meaningful action for threatened species.

This would naturally include:

- A rapid transition out of native forest logging to remove one of the key drivers of decline of threatened species in Victoria. Key areas of habitat must be identified and protected, as critical areas which threatened species rely on to survive are still under threat of logging.
- Greater protections for threatened species against extractive industries such as logging, mining, development, and fossil-fuel projects.
- Expansion of formal reserves and identification and protection of key habitat for species like the threatened Greater Glider.
- Climate change and bushfires also have significant and grave impacts on forests and wildlife. Taking strong action on climate change has the potential to halt these impacts to climate change vulnerable threatened species.
- Restoration of areas which have been heavily impacted by logging and other extractive industries, as well as areas impacted by the horrific 2019/2020 bushfires.
- Prioritising First Nations voices and traditional practices when it comes to land management and forming this as the foundation of how we look after our ecosystems.

GECO has for many years campaigned in East Gippsland, with many living remotely in communities which have been heavily impacted by bushfires. A preliminary report into the impacts of the bushfires have revealed that the fire has devastated wildlife and forests in the region, over 70% of the forests in East Gippsland burnt in the fires and there over 200 species which have been gravely impacted. There has since been no action from government regarding increased protections for threatened species, and they have in fact announced plans to schedule additional logging within and outside the fire extent.

The lack of regulation of logging in Victoria's native forest is another serious failing on the government's part to prevent the decline of ecosystems and biodiversity values. Of thousands of breach reports submitted to the Environment Department ranging from logging in threatened species habitat, illegal logging of rainforest, out of control coupe burns escaping into critically endangered Leadbeater's Possum buffers, illegal logging of threatened Tree Geebung (a species found only in Victoria's Central Highlands which is meant to be protected by law) and numerous other cases have resulted in no litigation or repercussions.

Lack of regulatory oversight, and a culture of ineffective, weak, and failed regulatory actions from the Environment Department means that logging is essentially unregulated in Victoria, and already weak and inadequate prescriptions and laws for protection of species seriously threatened with extinction are rarely adhered to.

The government has also recently announced plans to review the rules which govern logging in Victoria to weaken laws and remove third party rights to prevent community groups from taking legal action against VicForests.

Conservation efforts and legal actions are conducted mostly by small volunteer groups of concerned community members, rather than the government. Victorians highly value the unique and special wildlife and forests which are considered not only iconic, but critical in so many ways from providing Melbourne with clean drinking water and mitigating the effects of climate change through carbon sequestration. The Mountain Ash forests of the Central Highlands on Melbourne's doorstep store the most carbon of any forest ecosystem in the

world. Forests and ecosystems hold an intrinsic cultural and spiritual value for Victorian First Nations people, and there has been no consent from First Nations groups to log native forests.

The government has little to no engagement with Traditional Owner's on land management, and this requires urgent action. The government must acknowledge and address the impacts that land clearing, logging and environmental degradation particularly has on Traditional Owner's, as their Country holds their history, culture, totems, and rich stories.

There is a myriad of direct threats to Victoria's diverse and threatened ecosystems. The situation will only deteriorate further unless the government takes serious action to remove the threats to ecosystems and biodiversity values. Bringing forward the transition out of native forest logging, having stronger protections for species and ecosystems are critical steps the government can take to ensure Victoria's precious ecosystems not only survive, but thrive, for generations to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Yours faithfully,

Chris Schuringa

Goongerah Environment Centre (GECO)

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