

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria. [REDACTED].

Like so many Australians, last summer's devastating bushfires have left an indelible mark on me, and with that, an ever increasing sense of urgency that individually, locally and nationally, we must make radical changes and push forward the necessary policies to allow us to adapt to and address this global environmental crisis we are in. I am already wondering with a sense of dread and foreboding: what will this summer be like? While my submission does not provide refined, specific solutions to this pressing issue, I hope to provide a personal insight and perhaps a broader perspective that I hope our policy makers will consider as they begin their inquiry.

Earlier this year, I walked out of Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport having just returned from an overseas trip, and I remember feeling the surreal shock of realising just how severe the devastating effects of the fires were - I didn't have a facemask on, and every time I breathed in I could feel the smoke and toxic particles inhaling straight into my lungs. I was equally shocked that no-one around me seemed to be concerned. No one wore face masks or seemed to have the same reaction I did- which was to immediately cover my mouth and nose with a scarf. It was surreal because it seemed like we were all pretending things were fine when they clearly were not. I think maybe it is because I have a health background- that I reacted the way I did. I work as a physiotherapist and as a student I studied acutely the effects of smoking on the cardiorespiratory system- inhaling toxic chemicals can lead to irreversible lung damage. This, coupled with my experience of witnessing patients suffering from emphysema in hospital, has made me hyper aware of the importance of air quality, our lungs, and our health.

Protecting our environment and protecting and looking after ourselves are not two separate issues. From a health point of view, the two issues, in fact, strongly support each other. How do we stay healthy? We stay healthy by eating well and moving our bodies. We stay healthy by having our survival needs met so we do not live with undue stress and uncertainty. Emotionally, we stay well by connecting with others and making time for ourselves. For so many of us, staying healthy involves going outside into the natural environment. For me personally, it means going for a local walk at Princes Park, or when I could, visiting the 1,000 steps at the Dandenong Ranges. Over the years I've gone swimming at Brighton beach with my friends, enjoyed the scenic drive on the Great Ocean Road, camped in the Grampians, and have recharged from routine by going to the snow at Mt Baw Baw and skiing at Falls Creek. I've enjoyed these experiences immensely. There is no doubt that our natural environment plays a fundamental role in helping us maintain our wellbeing, and here in Victoria we are so fortunate to have so much diversity in the nature that surrounds us.

As vitally important as it is to look after our own health and wellbeing, we also must look after the natural environment that allows us to have these positive experiences. It is a great tragedy that our state of Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with 66% of our land having been cleared of native trees, shrubs, and plants; the habitats that support our

wildlife. However, this same wildlife also supports, through the intricately complex and balanced way of nature- much like the systems of our own bodies- their natural habitats. One hundred and twenty Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are on the brink of extinction- and each one plays a crucial role in maintaining the homeostasis of their environments. The long-term consequences of even one extinct species is far-reaching. In the world we are already collectively witnessing this mass extinction happening, and it is so vital that we do what we can to protect our own endangered flora and fauna in Victoria.

I believe the fundamental flaw driving this destruction of our natural habitat boils down to our current understanding of our relationship to the land we live on. Unlike Indigenous traditions, who uphold the belief that the land is sacred and therefore must be protected; thereby instilling sustainability as a way of life and for all living beings' survival- we have not been able to do that. As a result, our natural world has suffered. I believe education is the key for real long-lasting change towards a sustainable future, but with an imminent global climate crisis threatening our lives and existence- we must take concrete action now.

We must all decide to become custodians of the land. This means making choices that will maintain, restore and protect our natural environments here in Victoria. There are many ways to do this, and I know we have the environmental scientists and researchers we need who can greatly assist policy makers and legislators to do this. My hope is that policy makers will listen to these experts more than they listen to the lobbyists and corporate interests. However, there are some obvious solutions that can definitely be supported: for example, a state-wide program of weed and invasive species eradication would not only create thousands of jobs but would be an absolute step in the right direction to help restore the integrity of the land. A dedicated tree-planting workforce would also be vital to help restore habitats lost. Strengthening environmental laws would also be a significant step in the right direction. We need to make it clear that destruction of our natural habitats has consequences and companies that profit from this need to be re-evaluated and held responsible for their contributing actions. We need to look after the land more than we destroy it.

The irony I face as I write this is that we are now in a global pandemic, and when I go outside everyone is wearing face masks. This has become our 'new normal'. I wonder if we will be doing the same this summer. Leading experts and scientists around the world have made clear that this pandemic has been *a result of our destruction to our global environment*. International leaders of the UN, WHO and WWF International are all calling for a *green recovery* from this Covid-19 pandemic.

I want to conclude my letter with an excerpt of a speech made by Greta Thunberg for a podcast she recently recorded called: Humanity Has Not Yet Failed:

“So if we are to avoid a climate catastrophe we have to make it possible to tear up contracts and abandon existing deals and agreements on a scale we can't even begin to imagine today and that alone requires a whole new way of thinking- since those type of actions are not politically, economically or legally possible today. The climate and ecological crisis cannot be solved within today's political and economic systems. That's not an opinion, that's a fact. I understand that all of this sounds uncomfortable and depressing and I fully understand why you as a politician or news editor choose to look away. But you must also realise that for us who actually have to live with the consequences for the rest of our lives, that's a luxury we

can't afford."

Her words resonate with me, and I know for a lot of young people, so clearly. The harsh reality is that our current global economic and political systems need to be radically changed to address the threat of our global climate crisis. Anything less than a concerted, sustained, long-term investment towards sustainability and the protection of our natural environments and resources is a luxury my generation, and future generations, cannot afford. I am writing to support this inquiry. I hope that our policy makers can take seriously the concerns of their constituents, and work very closely with environmental scientists and researchers in moving forward towards a more sustainable Victoria. I hope we can all come to understand our roles as important custodians of the land. Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

Kind regards,

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