

Thank you for conducting this inquiry. I am an artist and I care deeply for the landscapes of Victoria. All my life I have participated in attempts to retain remnant ecosystems and rehabilitate lost ecosystems – from my childhood in suburban Murrumbena where, in spite of our protests and plantings, developers chopped down the last of the remnant redgums to build flats and now, when I volunteer along the Merri Creek or with the Regent Honey eater Project near Benalla, or revegetate friends' land in the highlands out of Seymour. I'm also participating in a program to save remnant varieties of indigenous plants, collecting seeds from the common everlastings whose 'mother' plant – a sprawling remnant - I have visited near the Donnybrook cemetery. I'm no expert, but what I have noticed is that no matter how hard we try, we can never recreate the remnant vegetation – whether it's grassland or woodland or forest. Ours is a poor attempt at imitation. Yet we continue to sprawl and destroy these precious environments, before we've even fully understood them. Ours is the most cleared state in Australia, having lost native vegetation on 66% of our land. And now over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are under threat, and 120 animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are on the brink of extinction – all within Victoria. Our biodiversity was poor before the last bushfires, and now 1.4 million hectares have burned in Victoria including rainforests, wet forests and lowland forests. This has affected so many species, like the East Gippsland galaxias, the sooty owl, long-footed potoroo and so on. What can we do? The state government needs to come good on its promises of preserving remnant grassland instead of favouring developers. We need to halt our sprawl. We need to tackle introduced pests and weeds. Prevent over-fishing and ban native duck-shooting. We need to transition now out of native forest logging, putting the money saved back into our regional communities. We need more regenerative farming practices. We need to listen to the experts on fire management. We need to pour resources – and create jobs – into our state parks. And we need to do everything in our power to halt (and reverse) climate change: this means no new gas at all, transition out of all fossil fuels and boost renewables. This is urgent. We're running out of time.

*Maggie Cowling*

