

## **Wombat Forestcare Inc.**



21 August 2020

### **Submission to Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria 2020**

Wombat Forestcare (WFC) welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission.

The Victorian State of the Environment Report 2018 paints a very bleak picture of the current condition of biodiversity and ecosystems in Victoria.

None of the 35 indicators used to measure the condition of biodiversity are rated as "good" and only seven are rated as "fair". Twenty-one are rated as "poor", and seven are rated as "unknown".

The report also paints a bleak picture for the future. In terms of trends, eighteen of the indicators are rated as deteriorating, only one indicator is improving and seven are stable. Unfortunately the picture is probably much worse given the lack of adequate monitoring and research that is undertaken.

One example of this dramatic decline of biodiversity in Victoria, the Threatened Species Recovery Hub (funded by several universities) has developed a Threatened Species Index for mammals in Victoria.

This index "suggests that for the species where information is available the relative abundance of threatened and near threatened mammals in Victoria has decreased by 72% between 1995 and 2016." (Factsheet: A Threatened Mammal Index for Victoria, Threatened Species Recovery Hub)

In terms of the Federal government, a recent interim review of the Environmental Protection Biodiversity Act found the laws have been largely ineffective and lead to a steady decline in biodiversity over the last twenty years.

Both these reports reflect the very low priority placed on biodiversity conservation by current and past governments at all levels – Federal, State and Local.

Inadequate resources are devoted to ecosystem protection, on-ground works and addressing the major threats to biodiversity. Some of our key areas of concern are outlined below.

#### **Increase resourcing for biodiversity conservation**

Conservation has suffered from very low levels of investment for decades under both Labor and Liberal governments. If the current crisis facing our ecosystems is to be addressed significantly increased funding is needed, including for research, data collection, monitoring, ecological restoration and rebuilding ecological connectivity.

#### **New National Parks and Conservation Areas**

Despite the biodiversity crisis, the declaration of new National Parks in Victoria has slowed substantially in recent years. The current government is the first

Victorian government in a quarter of a century not to increase the area of national parks, and not a single additional marine area has been protected since 2002.

Establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system across public land is a key way to protect our biodiversity in general and from the potential impacts of climate change.

The recent Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) Central West investigation recommended that additional areas of National, Conservation and Regional Parks be established to protect the Wombat, Mt Cole, Pyrenees and Wellsford forest areas.

Both the Wombat State Forest and the Mt Cole/Pyrenees State Forests occur in the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion. This bioregion has been identified as having a relatively small amount of public land in the conservation reserve system and has been identified as one of three priority bioregions for the creation of more protected areas.

The value the Wombat, Mount Cole and Pyrenees forests provides in terms of ecosystem services, water, carbon sequestration and tourism far outweigh the minor economic values of logging and firewood. In fact, these industries are not sustainable in native forests on public land without financial subsidies from the government.

The VEAC investigation found the Wombat State Forest to be one of the most important areas for threatened species in Victoria that is not currently protected.

The Wombat forest provides very high quality habitat for a very diverse range of native flora and fauna including over forty threatened species. This includes the endemic Wombat Leafless Bossiaea *Bossiaea vombata*, which is only found in the Wombat Forest and is now restricted to a small number of plants.

The Wombat forest also contains a significant population of Greater Gliders *Petauroides volans*. This population is the only population west of the Hume Highway and is at the western edge of their range.

With nearly a third of Greater Glider habitat affected by the 2019/20 summer bushfires, the importance of the Wombat State Forest for the conservation of Greater Gliders is of greater significance.

The Wombat Forest forms a significant part of the only 'largely intact' landscape in the largely cleared and fragmented central Victorian region. Most native vegetation types in the Wombat State Forest have a conservation status of depleted, vulnerable or endangered and are under-represented in the conservation reserve system.

The headwaters of seven major river systems with significant areas of high quality riparian vegetation are contained in the forest.

Mount Cole and the Pyrenees State Forests also provide critical habitat for a range of threatened flora and fauna species in a highly cleared landscape. This includes the endangered Mt Cole Grevillea *Grevillea montis-cole*, which is endemic to the area. Recently this species was found in areas within proposed logging coupes.

State forests in the study area have had a history of very poor management including widespread unsustainable logging, a lack of resourcing for conservation works and managing threatening processes such as weeds and pest animals.

Given the devastating impacts of the recent bushfires on biodiversity it has become even more important that these forests are protected in a park structure.

### **Native Vegetation Clearance Regulations**

The inadequate regulations regarding native vegetation clearance on private land are a significant cause of the decline in biodiversity in Victoria.

It is the classic death of a thousand cuts as many smaller areas of native vegetation are cleared for houses, to put in a fence, fuel management or to 'clean up' the property. However, each small bit adds to a very large amount of native vegetation being cleared each and every year.

The increase in number of homes being built on bush blocks also adds to the clearing of indigenous vegetation, particularly as trees can be removed, without a permit, within 10 metres of the house.

In order to reduce clearing and limit the confusion over when a permit is or isn't required, the number of exemptions to clearing regulations should be significantly reduced.

Detailed information on the amount of permitted clearing, area cleared under exemptions and illegal clearing at a state and individual council level should be collated to accurately determine how much native vegetation is being cleared on an annual and ongoing basis.

The current 'offset' system is also failing to reverse the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation in Victoria. It should be recognised that these offsets do not come close to compensating for the loss of native habitat or take many years for the offset to occur.

Also, protecting other existing areas of native vegetation to compensate for vegetation removal still results in a net loss of vegetation.

Increased resources are required for education, monitoring of illegal clearing and enforcement at both a council and state level. The penalties for illegal clearing should also be increased to act as a deterrent. Satellite imagery could be used to detect moderate to larger scale illegal clearing.

### **Timber and Firewood Harvesting**

Both timber harvesting and firewood collection are recognised as threatening processes to biodiversity. However, a significant amount of native vegetation clearance or modification occurs due to timber and firewood harvesting on public land under agreements and public authority exemptions.

Given the crisis with our ecosystems and the vital role these areas play as carbon sinks, timber and firewood harvesting in native forest and woodlands should cease immediately. The lack of regulation for domestic firewood collection on public land is exacerbating the negative impacts on forest and woodland ecosystems.

### **Fire Management on Public Land**

Fuel reduction burning (planned burns) and inappropriate fire regimes are recognised as potentially threatening process for many native species and

ecological vegetation classes across Victoria.

Fuel reduction burns result in death and injury to native animals, a loss of habitat in the short and longer term, including the loss of many hollow-bearing trees.

Some species such as the Greater Glider, Koala and Smoky Mouse are very susceptible to smoke inhalation, even at a significant distance with the latter species.

Areas containing Greater Gliders and other threatened species are regularly subject to fuel reduction burns. Despite many written submissions to Fire Operation Plans and attending countless meetings over many years regarding the impacts of fuel reduction burning on biodiversity in the Wombat State Forest, our groups concerns have largely been ignored.

Currently, far more resources are directed to manage our public forests for fire protection rather than to sustain the biodiversity and ecological processes of these areas.

The ability to manage wildfire through measures such as broad scale fuel reduction burning is questionable. Fuel reduction burns sometimes get out of control, fuel builds up quickly following the burns, more flammable species are encouraged and the area that can be treated each year is limited, especially as the climate warms.

All these factors mean in most instances it is very difficult or impossible to stop or contain severe bushfires, even in areas that have had fuel reduction burns. Therefore native species are being subjected to the impacts of repeated fuel reduction burns while the risk of wildfire is not significantly reduced.

Further, current planning laws still allow new houses to be built very close to or even within bushland. This often results in removal of native vegetation and more intense fire management to protect these houses.

### **Pest plants and animals**

Pest plants and animals are a well-recognised threat to biodiversity. However on many areas of public land little is done to control these pests in a systematic way.

Increased resources must be directed towards on-ground control of environmental weeds and animal pests on public land. Private land owners should be encourage to control areas of environmental weeds and pest animals through a combination of incentives, education and regulation.

### **Climate change**

Climate change will have many serious impacts on broad range of native species and ecosystems, Reducing the many threats outlined in this submission will help to build resilience in these ecosystem as they adapt to a changing climate.

Options to build resilience include establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system across all land tenures, restoring connectivity in the landscape, managing native vegetation as stores of carbon and establishing indigenous vegetation as carbon offsets.

## Recreation

A range of recreation activities, including trail bike riding, mountain biking, 4 wheel driving and prospecting, can have significant impacts when undertaken in our public forests and lands. These activities are increasing and need to be managed. Many of these activities impact those wishing to walk in public land and enjoy the natural surroundings.

National Parks are managed for conservation of flora, fauna and ecosystems and public access is managed. Regional Parks are managed for conservation and recreational activities that do not negatively impact the environment.

ParksVic is the agency best able to manage public land and the competing interests.

With nature conservation a low priority for governments and increasing political pressure from bush user groups, access for damaging recreational activities now seem a higher priority than nature conservation in our public forests.

Other issues that are to be addressed if we are to overcome declining ecosystems include the loss of large old trees in the landscape, converting existing River Frontage Crown Land to Conservation Zones and the need to restore connectivity in the landscape.

Finally, Victoria's poor performance on biodiversity is part of a wider global trend. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) recently released its Summary For Policymakers Report, which warns that "*Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history — and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely*".

We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

Gayle Osborne

Wombat Forestcare Inc.