

Submission: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline

August 23, 2020.



Introduction

The Friends of Crusoe Reservoir & No. 7 Park (FoCRN7) is an urban Landcare community group which formed 13 years ago.

Our group supports and assists the City of Greater Bendigo's (CoGB) park ranger in protecting the ecological and complementary recreational values of this local council-managed 210-hectare Box-Ironbark forested urban park.

The park is in the foothills of the Big Hill section of the Greater Bendigo National Park, where it shares an extensive common boundary.

Our group is a member of and/or has affiliation with an informal Joint Working Group with :

- the CoGB Council;
- associated government agencies; and
- representatives of the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Corporation

We consider environmental issues in order to achieve best practice and protection of the flora and fauna over this wider local landscape.

The group also supports CoGB Council requests for community input into the development of various local strategies and undertakes revegetation and other environmental works with the ranger.

We have also successfully implemented CoGB Council and State Government grants to aid the protection of some of the endangered flora and fauna species which exist in this reserve.

Submission

Dear Members of the Environment and Planning Committee,

The FoCRN7 welcomes the opportunity for input into the Victorian government's Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline. We wish to make some general comments according to the Terms of Reference, and propose some recommendations, as follows below.

Our group has carried out a number of initiatives in recent years to protect the biodiversity of flora and fauna species. An extensive CoGB Council-funded fauna survey report conducted in 2017 confirmed that Crusoe Reserve is a repository for a large number of threatened and endangered fauna species, with 24 species identified.¹

In 2017-19 with the assistance of a DELWP Biodiversity Community Action Grant for threatened species, our group undertook a project involving local schools, Parks Victoria and community groups to construct and install 120 nest boxes to enhance habitat for the endangered Powerful Owl and Brush-tailed Phascogales in the two parks. Monitoring and sharing of data is on-going.

With CoGB Council funding in 2018-19, a one year professional flora survey was undertaken.

It revealed less species identified than the surveyor had found in his previous survey of this area in 1999, including rare and threatened species, plus less species than the professional 2003 flora survey used by the CoGB Council as its data base for extant flora species.

¹ Owing to the short time frame, reptiles and amphibians were not able to be surveyed, thus it is expected that the number would be higher.

Extensive and detailed bird observations and recordings have been undertaken by group members over the previous nine years, confirming over 170 resident and transitional bird species sighted in the park, with 70 - 85 species generally present, according to the seasons.

However, more frequent hotter and drier seasons lower these species numbers, due to late or absent flowering of the Box and Ironbark trees and accompanying vegetation, plus decreases in reservoir water levels.

In common with the state Box-Ironbark Regional and National Parks which surround the City of Greater Bendigo, all native flora and fauna of our Parks suffer from a number of threatening processes, some of which include:

- increased encroachment from urbanisation;
- pressure of feral animals such as foxes, cats and deer;
- climate change;
- inappropriate planned burning regimes;
- insufficient funding for Parks Victoria compliance officers, signage and community education programs; and
- habitat fragmentation and loss of healthy forested land due to motor bike riders and mountain bike trail riders (MBT) groups not adhering to formed tracks (day and night riding).

Following a recent extensive municipal-wide audit, the Council of the CoGB has confirmed that tree cover has declined in the past 20 years.²

Obviously, the Native Vegetation Framework and the Offset system, introduced in 1989 to achieve a net gain in native vegetation, has failed. This failure has been recorded state-wide, as cited in this state government report:

‘Although the rate of land clearing has slowed since the introduction of Victoria’s native vegetation regulations in 1989, the quality and extent of native vegetation continues to shrink by about 4000 habitat hectares each year. This trajectory is largely the result of activities and entitled uses that are outside the regulatory framework (resulting in loss of extent of native vegetation), together with insufficient management of threats (resulting in loss of quality).’³

It is incontestable that Victoria’s ecosystems are in serious decline.

We know this on the basis of solid scientific research and data, detailed in scientific reports and policy directives of our state government agencies, such as the State of the Environment (SoE) reports since their inauguration in 2003, including the most recent SoE Report 2018, and ‘Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037’, DELWP, 2017. Government scientists report that:

‘Today, between one quarter and one third of all of Victoria’s terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals, along with numerous invertebrates and ecological communities, are considered threatened with extinction.’⁴

² To counter this loss and prepare for climate change, this year the CoGB Council introduced a Greening Greater Bendigo Strategy with a 10-year action plan, employing an ongoing full time project manager and a specialist tree arborist. The first phase commits to planting 3,000 trees per year until 2024.

³ *Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037*, DELWP, 2017, p.10

⁴ *Ibid*, p.7

According to Professor Don Driscoll of Deakin University, Central Victoria is one of the worst-hit regions, with approximately 200 animal and 575 plant species threatened.

Notably this figure doesn't include the species lost in the 2019 - 20 extreme bushfire season, in which 1.2 million hectares Victoria's forests were burnt, destroying more than 50% of the habitat of 185 rare and threatened Victorian native animals and plants.⁵

Like the scientists, we are concerned at the terrible and visible decline of Victoria's biodiversity which we see locally but which is echoed state-wide, and the failure to halt this decline due to the inadequacy of the legislative framework, combined with serious budgetary shortfalls.

More funding is needed to enable proper agency governance and compliance systems, community education programs, and capacity building to uphold our First Nations' connection to Country.

Overall Recommendation

Just as the state government heeded scientific advice in its response to the Covid 19 pandemic to protect the community, in the same manner, we ask that the government heed the scientific advice and recommendations of its own agencies in their reports to halt the native species extinction crisis.

General Recommendations

1. **Enact the Victorian Environmental Assessment Committee's (VEAC) recommendations now** for the upgrading of the status of west Victoria's forests - the Wellsford, Wombat, Pyrenees Ranges and Mt Cole forests.
Note: This legal requirement is now six months overdue.
2. **Introduce the position of a DELWP Chief Biodiversity Scientist** to oversee all scientific endeavour and provide counsel to the DELWP Secretary and the Minister for Environment, in order to improve the impact of biodiversity research across the Victorian environment portfolio. (As recommended in the State of the Environment Report 2018).
3. **Instigate a well-resourced Conservation Regulator** to police deforestation and threatening processes, and to ensure industries comply with environmental laws.
4. **Implement and resource Action Statements** - recovery plans - for threatened plants and wildlife. Currently only 15% of Victoria's over 2000 threatened plants and animals have these. This could follow the model of the NSW state government which has committed to a \$100 million **'Save our Species' program**. This is a scientific native species recovery program which systematically identifies and addresses threatening processes for species.
5. **Recognise the rights and interests of Traditional Owners** in all aspects of land and water management. This includes decision making over their traditional lands, including cultural fire practices.
6. **Increase funding for National Parks** from 0.5% to 1% of the State budget.
7. **Introduce an immediate moratorium on logging** in Victorian native forests, **cancel** the March 2020 10-year RFA, and **commit** to plantation timber forestry, as S.A. did in the 1970's.
8. **Ensure sustained funding within DELWP and other agencies.**

⁵ *'Andrews government in breach of duty after VEAC forest recommendations'*, Media Release, www.biolinksalliance.org.au, 8/6/2020

9. **Upgrade the two-year contracts of the local Parks Victoria Community Engagement Rangers** to a long-term position, and increase the number of these Rangers to two in each district, as is needed.
10. **Provide funding for multi-agency state-wide community education biodiversity programs**, incorporating both the natural assets and ecosystem services of our forests – through pamphlets, forums, talks, public information series, events, etc.
11. **Increase funding** of DELWP’s Land for Wildlife Bendigo office.
12. **Reintroduce local DELWP Biodiversity Units state-wide**, to employ long-term project officers to monitor and manage declining and threatened species.
13. **Employ more ecologists** in all aspects of DELWP, Parks Victoria and the CMAs and imbed these in regional areas and at all levels of decision-making processes.
14. **Engage with Traditional Owners** to include First Peoples’ values and traditional ecological knowledge in biodiversity planning and development.
15. **Employ more DELWP Compliance Officers** to monitor illegal 4 wheel drive, motor bike, MBT and general inappropriate forest usage.⁶
16. **Re-introduce a compulsory Environmental Effects Statement process for Vic Roads.** There is no other agency or business in Victoria which operates without this requirement. Roadside corridors are vital where native vegetation has been depleted, including their crucial function as wildlife corridors for diminishing native fauna. Removal of indigenous trees and its impact on regional salinity is also not considered by Vic Roads.
17. **Enact the recommendations of scientists on climate change**, as articulated in the Victorian government’s policies: ‘*Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037*’; *Water for Victoria*, 2016; and the *Agriculture Victoria Strategy, 2017*.⁷

Forest Fire Management & Bushfire Attack Recommendations

1. **Increase capacity** through staffing and training to enable all DELWP planned burns to **transition to burning by Traditional Owners** according to traditional cultural practices; not only will these programs have better environmental outcomes, they uphold First Peoples’ connection to Country and increase diversity of employment opportunities in regional Victoria.
2. **Ensure** all DELWP planned burns and fire planning/management are developed in conjunction with ecologists.
3. **Increase** DELWP biodiversity staff levels to enable on-ground truthing for the mandatory pre- and post- biodiversity planned burn assessment.
4. **Place a moratorium on all impacting operations** on the 2020 bushfire areas until scientific assessments into the full effects on our endangered and protected ecosystems have occurred.
5. **Put in place regulations over tree removal** and make assessments regarding hazardous trees more transparent in order to avoid the broadscale removal of remaining roadside vegetation.

⁶ For example, in the Shire of Mt. Alexander where the Harcourt Mountain Bike Trail Park - La Larr Ba Gauwa - covers 34 kms of trails over an area of 9000 hectares, only one part time DELWP Compliance Officer is employed.

⁷ See also <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-environment-2018/climate-change-impacts>.

6. **Put in place stronger regulations regarding the protection of unburnt sections of vegetation** within fire-affected forest areas. These islands of unburnt vegetation constitute vital natural refuges for the recovery of native plants and animals and must not be burnt in any fire attack programs. This this is especially so for old growth forests.
7. **Ban ‘salvage logging’** in burnt forest areas.

COVID-19 and Employment / Training Opportunities - Recommendations

Given the serious problem of unemployment and under-employment as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many opportunities exist for government funded environment programs which could include to :

1. **Make free TAFE Diploma and Certificate 111 Conservation and Land Management courses** available in Bendigo and state-wide.
2. **Sponsor more ecology degrees within the university sector**, where there is great demand.
3. **Create an extensive state-wide revegetation workforce** to restore habitat and tree loss. This could be solely a DELWP program, or a joint state government/local council partnership.
4. **Instigate an extensive state-wide invasive species program.** In line with DELWP’s biodiversity report, thousands of ongoing jobs could be created removing weeds and controlling feral animals.⁸ This could be a joint agency program, involving training and employment.
5. **Increase genuine nature-based tourism programs** which are underpinned by ecological understandings of the needs of environmental processes. Besides employment opportunities, such programs provide opportunities for a wider engagement by the public for connections with nature.
6. **Enhance the capacity for Traditional Owner participation in nature-based tourism programs**, to enable First Nations’ direction and management of such programs in accordance with traditional values and beliefs.

We look forward to positive outcomes from this Inquiry to halt the native species extinction crisis and strengthen the environmental protection of Victoria’s unique ecosystems.

Yours sincerely,

Gill Rosier President FoCRN7

Kerrie Norris Secretary FoCRN7

Hans Meinig Committee member FoCRN7

⁸ *Protecting Victoria’s Environment - Biodiversity 2037*, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2017, p. 10