

Submission for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline and Threatened Species in Victoria

As part of the material to be read by the commissioners of this inquiry, they should read and analyse Natural Victoria-Conservation Priorities for Victoria's Natural Heritage which was produced by the Victorian National Parks Association in 2014. This document clearly outlines what ecosystems are in decline, which species are threatened, what are the main threats, what are the gaps in protection are, priority actions and many pages of recommendations. By examining these recommendations and seeing what was accomplished or not can inform future directions for action today.

Examples from the Yarra Valley where I live, continue to demonstrate why our ecosystems are in decline. The spectacular mountain ash forest ecosystem has been reduced to 1.2 % of its former area. This ecosystem has been recognized internationally for its conservation values. However, in spite of the government planning to phase out logging in these forests by 2030, given the rate of logging now and the renewal of RFA's there may not be much of the mountain ash ecosystem left by then. Certainly, the opportunity for trees to reach maturity and become important habitat is still declining given the current logging regime.

A lot of time has been wasted over arguments as to whether important species such as the Leadbeater's possum and Greater Glider were endangered. Environmentalists claims about the critically endangered status of these species has been vindicated. It was the work of these groups that identified the location and numbers of these species not the government agencies that managed the forests and should have been doing this work. Again, the environmental groups had to take prolonged court action just to demonstrate that VicForests were not managing the forests properly and were logging in protected areas. Even when species like the Leadbeater's possum have been recognized as being critically endangered action plans to protect the species have not been mandated.

The impact of feral animals such as deer is also leading to ecosystem decline and preventing restoration work. I have seen extensive deer browse of food sources for the Leadbeater's possum in the forests. We have dedicated a lot of time and effort to removing weeds and restoring native vegetation along riparian areas and connecting it to existing bushland. Prior to the 2009 fires revegetation on our property was a relatively easy task. The deer populations exploded and unless we surround any revegetation efforts and sensitive habitat with 2 metre fences our revegetation efforts fail. The government heard many similar examples in the inquiry into feral species. It was estimated that fencing costs for successful habitat restoration work adds 40% in costs to these programs. A deer management strategy was developed but not enacted. At the moment community groups such as Landcare, Friends groups and local councils have to run culls at their own expense. There is little coordination and funding from government. One area where deer control is critical is the Yellingbo Conservation Area. Revegetation efforts for the critically endangered Helmeted Honey Eater and the Lowland Leadbeater's Possum just stalled until there was funding under the biodiversity program for deer culls. Now there has been some success in populations of the Honey Eater increasing.

It was distressing to learn that the platypus will be listed as vulnerable. A lot of our riparian restoration work has been done to restore platypus habitat along the waterways in the Yarra Valley. Waterways in this area still have healthy populations and there is considerable community interest and support from Melbourne Water for extending riparian habitat restoration work. We should not be accepting the picture of decline across waterways. It is possible to reverse the trend. A recent example was seeing platypus back in the Werribee River area as a result of work done by groups around the Bacchus Marsh area.

Given that habitat loss is a major cause of ecosystem decline, the government has the opportunity to protect two important areas in the state.

The recommendations from the VEAC inquiry into the Central Western Forests to establish the Mt. Cole, Wombat, Wellesford and Pyrennes National Parks should be implemented immediately.

Acquisition of lands for grassland protection that was previously recommended for the west of Melbourne also should occur.

There are many organizations that are doing successful work in restoring ecosystems and reducing species decline. Examples are Bush Heritage, Landcare, Trust for Nature and Friends groups. Their work is extensively documented in their literature and annual reports. As well many local governments and agencies like Melbourne Water are doing excellent work. Both of these kinds of organizations should be well supported through funding in continuing and strengthening their work.