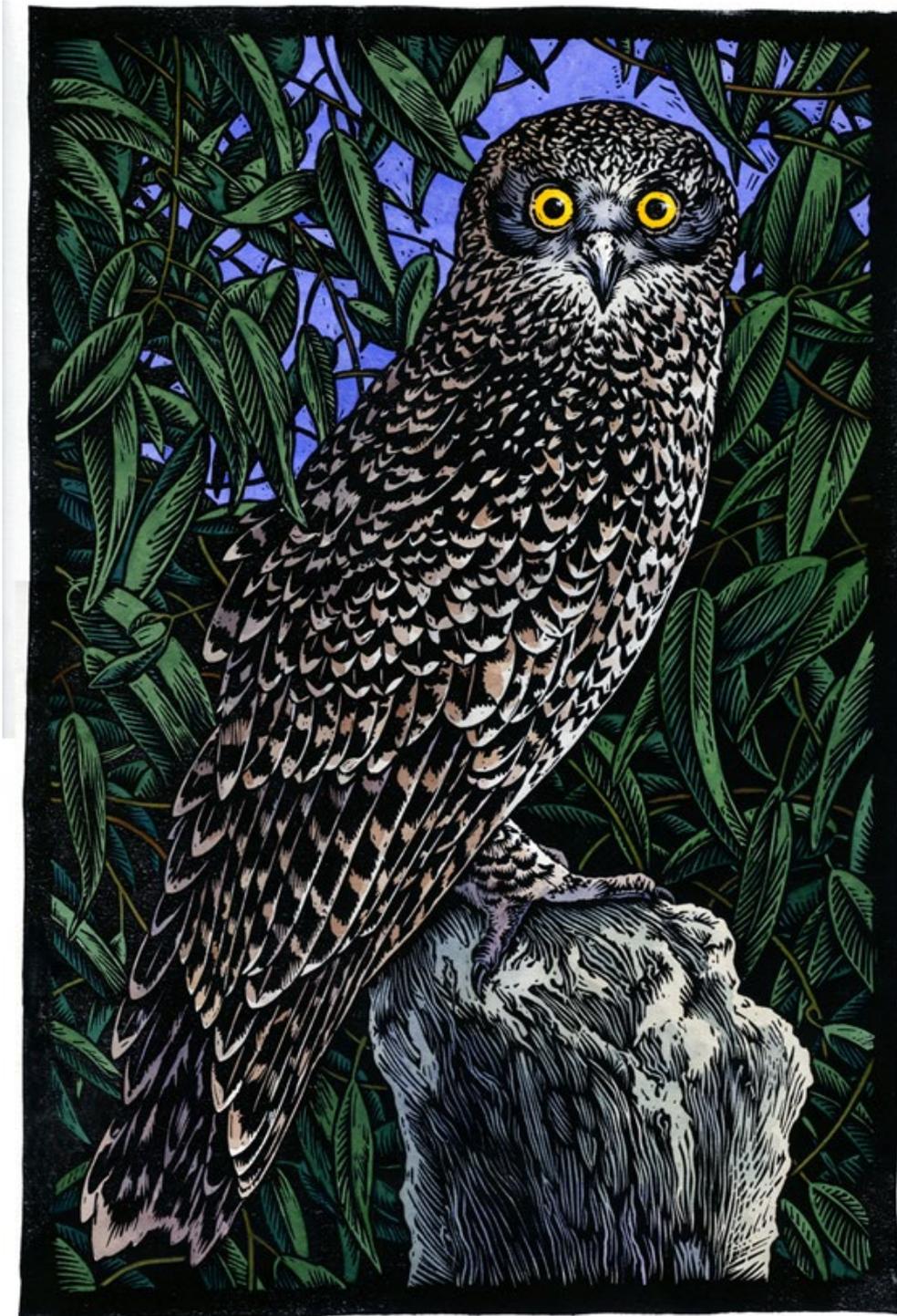


Environment and Planning Committee
Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria



Powerful Owl -The largest of Australia's Owls. Top level night predator

My name is Robert Mancini. I am a graphic designer and visual artist who has had a lifelong love of and passion for the natural world with its richness of fauna and flora species. In my career, I have worked on numerous national and international natural history publications, and have more recently worked for conservation and environmental groups, local Councils and Parks organisations.

My personal artwork heavily features the at-risk species which are only just hanging in there in the dwindling wetland and grassland habitats of the urban areas of Melbourne.

I live in the west of Melbourne where there is heavy pressure on the remaining open spaces for development and housing and where some 'wild' open space has only survived because of its proximity to heavy industry. I am currently a member of a group that is working towards building a wetland centre in Melbourne's west to inform, educate and study the critical importance of the remnant wetland areas to us at a base level from a physical and mental health perspective.

I grew up in the west, but lived in the Victorian Central Highlands for close to 20 years, where we raised our children. During this time, we saw directly how badly mismanaged the State's forests were. Areas that were meant to be rehabilitated or prepared for future harvesting and areas due to come on stream for harvesting were in no way suitable in the time frames stated. The decline in mammal and avian species could easily be seen on a decade to decade time scale. Most of the timber was being exported as chips with the timber stream to local sawmills drying up and leading to their closures. This made it hard to comprehend the continuation of the logging practices even then as there wasn't even a small number of local/State jobs to protect. This timber harvesting was clearly having adverse effects through habitat loss on the populations of threatened and at risk species such as Victoria's faunal emblem the Leadbeater's Possum and birds such as the Powerful Owl.

I returned to Melbourne over 10 years ago and was taken aback at the lack of open space kept in high growth areas with virtually no consideration to conserving or preserving ecosystems such as grasslands.

Things in our forests haven't fared any better in that time. Considering Victoria has lost the more of its native forest than any other state in Australia you would think this issue would be a matter of extreme priority and importance. We do not require any more dedicated and targeted studies to tell us that our forests are in trouble as healthy functioning ecosystems. There is enough information at our disposal to clearly show us that virtually all our natural ecosystems are in decline. Plant diversity on a broad scale has been depleted and the number of threatened and at-risk fauna species is on the rise and many are facing extinction unless urgent and direct action to preserve, enhance and extend their habitat is carried out. We need to be expanding habitat not attempting to evaluate whether the last fragile remnants can be harvested for seemingly meagre returns and benefit.

On top of the general poor state of our forests (I cannot call them ecosystems as many do not qualify adequately) we have seen the devastation wrought by the last fire season with the associated loss of wildlife, habitat loss and degradation. We need to immediately halt the logging of old growth and other habitat substantial forests. We need to stop hiding behind a forest classification system that allows forests of absolutely clear conservation and irreplaceable value to be cleared and harvested for negligible returns to the people of Victoria and at a tremendous loss.

The planned 2030 forest transition needs to be brought forward to allow serious protection of these areas. It is interesting that Vic Forests declined to take part in the FSC assessment process recently, claiming that they would most likely be treated unfairly. If their practices were found to be unsustainable and suspect, then I would like to think this would be made public so we can make an objective and informed decision of whether they should be allowed to continue logging at all.

The logging of recent bushfire ravaged areas is hard to comprehend and has been denounced by experts in the field as potentially disastrous from an ecosystem point of view. Generally, the harvesting in our water catchment areas has long been criticised not only for the harmful effects it has on water quality but the effect on the beneficial rainfall generating qualities of the forests in

those areas.

There is a certain irony about the argument of whether to log or not, the climate challenge facing us is the biggest one mankind has faced, and one of the biggest drivers of the planet's warming outside of CO2 emissions is loss of vegetation. Instead of logging, we should be planting and restoring natural forests and plantation planting purely on the basis of oxygen generation. In the face of climate catastrophe, Victoria's forests play a critical role in removing carbon pollution from the air we all breathe, nourishing us with clean air and safe, clean drinking water. The Victorian State Government must develop carbon accounting and policies that include forests.

We need to take urgent action in order to seriously tackle the decline of all ecosystems in Victoria.

The state government must urgently implement and properly resource Action Statements (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements.

Victoria needs a new, independent, well resourced conservation regulator to police deforestation and other destructive industries. The EPA is the independent watchdog for pollution, but currently there is no independent watchdog to ensure industries comply with environmental laws, with numerous breaches to laws continuing to occur and a long history of regulators turning a blind eye.

Community rights must be guaranteed when governments are making environmental decisions, including the right to participate, the right to access necessary information, the right to challenge environmental decisions and the right to transparency in government decision making.

Robert Mancini

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I agree to this submission being made public