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**Privacy preference:** I would like my submission publicly available

### **Submission to the Victorian Extinction Inquiry**

There are many scientists and people who study ecology who know far more about the extinction of species than I do, but despite this, I wanted to put in my own submission and speak from my own observations of how the extinction crisis has played out around me.

I will do this by recalling a number of experiences from my childhood and compare them to present day, to show the drastic reduction in insects and animals that exist today.

As a child, I grew up in the Goulburn Valley, stolen country of the Pangerang (Bangerang) people of North East Victoria and despite the farming country being drastically altered from it's original state before anglo/European settlement, there was still far more species, more flora and fauna than there is now.

First example is frogs. As a child, the soil around us was teeming with frogs. When ever we got a shovel and dug a hole in the ground, to get worms for fishing or to plant a tree or shrub, then we nearly always found frogs curled up in the soil. They were also common and loud in irrigation drains running off the channel, and in farm dams.

This is no longer the case, a few very small frogs might be found swimming in pools, but largely there are no big frogs left any more, you can't see them and you can't hear them as you used to.

Another observation is on hot summer evenings or during the day as well, when ever you drove anywhere in the car, by the time you had driven for 15 to 30 minutes, the windscreen would quickly be covered in insect splatter. It was a common practice for country people to pull into servos, fill up the tank and then wipe down the very dirty windscreens, covered in beetles, bugs, flies, wasps, grasshoppers and even praying mantis.

These days, they still have the bucket and squidgy there for people to clean their windscreens, but largely the windscreens on cars do not get dirty anymore. The insects just aren't there and this is very, very sad. This anecdotal account is backed up by science. Recent studies from Germany and Puerto Rico suggest that insects may be in a state of catastrophic population collapse: the German data describe a 76% decline in biomass over 26 years, while the Puerto Rican study estimates a decline of between 75% and 98% over 35 years.

**Insects** are integral to every terrestrial food web, being food for birds, bats, reptiles, amphibians and fish, and have vital roles - such as pollination, pest control and nutrient recycling. Land and freshwater ecosystems will collapse without **insects**.

Another example is birdlife. Common birds to spot during my childhood were red robins, fairy wrens, paddocks chock full of Ibis, several pairs of pelicans sitting in the irrigation channels and beautiful Cormorants.

These days when visiting my parents on the property of my childhood home, there are few Ibis, never fairy wrens or red robins, and rarely if ever, a pelican or cormorant. There are still lots of magpies and plenty of white cockatoos. The decline in insects means that the decline in birdlife has followed suit.

Finally, an example of the loss of a species is Billy Buttons, which used to be a mass of summer wild flowers on the sides of the roads on the flat Goulburn Valley area, now there is barely a single Billy Button to be found.

So these personal observations back up what I have learned from others, such as the following facts presented by the Victorian Greens, of which I hope you will take into consideration throughout this inquiry:

- Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia - 66% of our land has been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants - the habitat that supports our native wildlife
- Over 700 native plants, animals, insects and beautiful ecosystems are under threat, with this number growing every day
- 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are now at the brink of extinction
- More than 70 threatened species make their home in forests that are still being logged

On top of this, the fires of 2019/20 have dramatically worsened the outlook for the places and creatures that make Victoria such an amazing place. The scale, severity and destruction of these fires was unprecedented, a word we have got pretty used to hearing these days, but it's still true.

In summary the fires:

- Burned 1.4 million hectares, just in Victoria
- Destroyed more than 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals, plants and other creatures
- Pushed already critically endangered species like the greater glider, smoky mouse, mountain ash eucalyptus and many others perilously close to extinction

The following proposals come from the Victorian Greens which I wholeheartedly endorse and hope you will act on, as sensible measures to address the extinction crisis before it is too late.

Right now, as we come to grips with the economic fallout from COVID-19, it's a perfect time for governments to spend public money and create jobs looking after people and the environment.

#### **a) A huge program of weed and invasive species eradication**

Victoria is overrun by weeds and invasive animals, which kill and out-compete our native

plants and wildlife. It's a big job to manage them, but it's critical for restoring habitat. We could create thousands of jobs clearing weeds out of rivers, creeks, farmland and national parks, and humanely managing introduced animals like cats, deer, rabbits and foxes.

**b) A tree-planting workforce to restore habitat**

67% of Victoria's trees, mangroves, shrubs, and other plants have been cleared since colonisation. Much of what's left is in poor health. We could create thousands of jobs in both the city and the country, replanting trees and vegetation in our parks, streets, rivers and creeks right across our state, but especially in bushfire-affected areas. We could also help landowners plant native vegetation on their land.

**c) A dedicated program for reviving species facing extinction**

The work of rescuing Victoria's more than 120 species at risk of extinction deserves and needs a dedicated program of funding. NSW has committed \$100 million to a 'Save Our Species' program, which systematically identifies risks to species and goes about addressing them. It also includes action like breeding programs so healthy populations of animals, birds and plants can be restored. Victoria has nothing like this program and spends almost no money on this type of dedicated species recovery work. We also spend very little money on research for our scientists to study new solutions to the extinction crisis. It's time that changed.

**d) An end to habitat destruction and strengthened nature laws**

We cannot hope to stop extinction unless we stop the destructive activities that are driving it. We need to:

- End native forest logging and transition to a plantation based timber industry
- Phase out coal and gas burning, which is making the climate crisis worse and driving devastating extreme events like heat waves, fires and floods
- Stop destructive and unnecessary development like the Western Highway Duplication and the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal which continue to bit-by-bit erode the health of Victoria's environment for corporate profits.
- Change the laws that allow wildlife to be killed, and grasslands and other habitat to be cleared, with little to no ramifications.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission and I eagerly await the great outcomes you will put forward to help secure the sustainable future of our beautiful state.

Sincerely,

Renaee.

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Renaee Churches