

To: The Committee Manager  
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Re: Submission to the Victorian Extinction Inquiry

From: Judith Wakeman,



Thankyou for the opportunity to present this submission.

During the bushfires of 2019/2020, millions of hectares of habitat and the lives of billions of wildlife were lost. These bushfires were foreseen and government bodies were warned by a global cohort of scientists supported by years of research data and supercomputer simulations. But the warnings were ignored until it was too late.

That same scientific community is telling us that we are already facing a mass extinction event. Many unique Australian plants and animals have already been lost – and many of which will have been lost without even having been identified. We cannot know the ongoing effect of the extinction of a species of plant or animal.

Our children learn about the “web of life” – an interconnected web where each species has a role to play in the long term viability of an ecosystem. Some people define a forest by a handful of trees, little realising the myriad creatures and organisms that enable the biome that is truly a forest to flourish and endure through millennia.

Few of us can comprehend the complexity of a single old growth tree, from its root systems supporting microorganisms and drawing water from the depths of the earth, to its crown turning sunlight into energy and drawing carbon from the air, let alone the complex community of life we call a forest.

And this dearth of understanding is only surpassed by our ignorance of marine ecosystems.

My parents enriched my childhood with the love of nature - searching through rock pools at the beach, sitting on rocks in clear mountain streams, listening to the night sounds when my sleep was interrupted by nightmares. As a teacher I will always remember how my granddaughter gently released the butterfly that emerged from the cocoon we’d been watching, the joyful response of a young man when I pointed out a Koala that I had “Made his day”, and the way the faces of my international students lit up when I showed them how to hear frogs.

Very young children don’t need to be taught to listen, but they need a reason to keep listening and they need to value the world outside so they can manage their own wellbeing.

After the horrific death toll amongst non-human animals during the summer of 2019/2020 donations to wildlife shelters took the frontline workers by surprise. Some gave money, others food, others time and still more joined with over 250,000 crafters globally to make pouches, mittens and

wraps for injured and homeless wildlife. For most it was in answer to their grief, a very real grief that is increasingly adding to the costs of climate change and species extinction.

Solastalgia, eco-anxiety, climate change grief, is a pre-traumatic stress that is not adequately recognised but is the basis for much of the mental anguish our community, and especially our young people, experience on a daily basis. The losses - of life, of land and of innocence - associated with the 2019/2020 Australian bushfires permanently diminished the wellbeing of people around the country and across the globe.

In 2020, after the bushfires I am feeling a sense of loss for all the places I loved in East Gippsland. The National Parks - Erinundra, Snowy River and Alpine - were still reeling from the 2014 fires and the devastation caused by logging and ongoing programs of baiting with 1080. The loss of wildlife along the Bonang Highway must be near total – in over two dozen trips along a 90km stretch from Orbost to Bonang since 2014, at all times of the day and night there is no life to be seen, and not even roadkill provides evidence of what once hid in the undergrowth; and the night forest sounds are empty of gliders and mopokes. But the logging continues.

A piece of my heart dies every time I see a tree being felled, an ecosystem being subdivided and covered in concrete, a creek being overrun with silt from a logging coupe, wildlife knowingly and carelessly extinguished by yet another highway. I am not alone.

There is no longer an excuse for the destruction of Australia's national heritage. The scientists are telling us that ecosystem destruction does not provide us with a sustainable future. Sustainable alternatives must be found, or implemented if they are already available.

When I see the last days of the wonderous thylacine on grainy black and white film, I wonder how my grandchildren will experience Australian wildlife. Will they be satisfied with visiting a zoo from 2020 while wearing a Virtual Reality headset? How will virtual reality enable them to experience the excitement of waiting for a quoll to be tempted by a piece of apple at a fireside camp, or watching for dragonflies and tadpoles in the ecosystem of a mountain pond, or waking up to the sound of lyrebirds competing with each other in the misty dawn? Will they realise what they have lost? Will they feel as I do when I read about the folly of humans that arrogantly called themselves wise?

As Homosapiens we must start living up to our Latin title of "wise man" and stop destroying our children's and grandchildren's future. We must start listening to the scientists and not the economists for whom consumption is the only creed, because the earth is not an infinite resource.

And then we might be able to look our children in the eyes without shame and guilt, and know we have provided them with a future they can contemplate without fear.

How can we do this?

- Recognise and consult scientific and indigenous experts in the areas of environmental protection and management, including bushfire control.
- Cease logging in water catchments and national parks.
- Cease the use of 1080.
- Remove subsidies for extraction industries and enforce environmental conditions with significant penalties for infringements.

- Ensure rehabilitation of ecosystems destroyed by logging or extraction industries.
- Increase funding and create employment programs to rehabilitate national parks.
- Recognise important habitat zones and increase protection for these areas from logging and other destructive practices.
- Increase awareness of national and state natural environments through support to tourism and education programs.
- Increase support to environmental research, especially in marine parks where degradation is more difficult to identify.
- Recognise the role of Homo Sapiens as Protectors and Stewards of the land, the oceans, plants and non-human animals, and not overlords with boundless rights to plunder the natural world.
- Consider alternatives wood based paper products such as hemp.
- Cease the use of single use plastics such as balloons.
- Include consideration of public wellbeing in policy and planning decisions.

Surely we can do this for future generations. We may not be able to stop extinction, but we should be prepared to make the sacrifices needed to flatten the curve, in the hope that future generations will be able to turn humanity away from the cliff.

I am happy for this submission to be made public.

Regards

Judith Wakeman