

Environment and Planning Committee
Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

25/08/2020

Dear members of the Committee,

I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

I agree to this submission being made public.

My name is Emily. I've lived in Victoria for my entire life, and have a deep love for the diverse and spectacular natural environment we are lucky enough to be surrounded by. If this time in quarantine has taught me anything, it is the importance of these natural places for my mental health and wellbeing. More than anything, I've been challenged by the lack of contact with Victoria's beautiful forests, grasslands, and waterways. Living in the Northern Suburbs, the Merri Creek has been my only point of contact with nature. Whilst the creek is amazing, it hasn't quite hit the spot the way our ancient old growth forests can.

I'm really excited by this opportunity to engage in the Inquiry, because the issue of ecosystem decline in Victoria is a serious one. It's simple. We are facing crisis. This sounds alarmist, but it's the truth. The facts are in, and there is absolutely no denying that we are on a serious tipping point in our relations with this planet, and very close to falling over the edge.

I've witnessed firsthand the devastation caused by clear-fell logging. Personally, I find this to be the most atrocious crime of Victoria; that we continue to participate in, and profit from, the destruction of our native forests. How can we undertake an inquiry into ecosystem decline without acknowledging that this state continues to log, and log violently, the very ecosystem which provides clean air and drinking water for the millions of people living in it? It is absolutely atrocious that we have not yet transitioned our forestry industry into plantations, and that we continue to allow companies such as Nippon Paper to pillage these beautiful woodlands for the purpose of pulping native trees and turning them into the cheapest copy paper on the market. Logging these forests is detrimental in so many ways. In considering ecosystem decline, surely we must consider the effect of ripping ancient native forests out of the ground, and then burning entire clear-fell areas. Surely it is obvious the impact that a practice like this has on the flora and fauna of Victoria, as well as our climate as a whole.

These forests provide habitat for countless endangered species, and VicForests have now been proven, in the Federal Court of Australia, to not be undertaking due diligence in their operations in these areas.

What this means is that there is inadequate surveying for threatened species, inadequate attention paid to the regeneration of forests post-operation, and rampant risks of future illegality in all of the work of our state-owned logging body. To have VicForests found guilty of illegal logging in the Federal Court is an embarrassment for Victoria, and something that should absolutely not be taken lightly. There needs to be an immediate end to the logging of native forest, and the transition plan for industry workers needs to be brought forward from 2024 to today. 2030 is far too late.

The value of these forests is immense. We are talking about habitat for creatures like the Leadbeater's Possum and Greater Glider. We are talking about cleanliness and volume of drinking water for the city of Melbourne, specifically in regard to the logging happening near the Thompson's Reservoir. There is also the mental health factor; natural environments have been shown, time and time again, to have incredibly beneficial restorative properties for the human psyche. Additionally, the carbon sequestration potential of Mountain Ash is immense. The forests of Victoria's Central Highlands have the highest rate of carbon storage of any forests studied globally. This potential is entirely lost when forests are logged, and newly planted trees do not hold even a fraction of the carbon value that our old growth forests do. If we are to respond adequately to the threats of the climate crisis, then the most important measure we can take is to protect our remaining old growth.

We are facing extinction.

You need to take notice of this. You need to protect all of our native forests.

This is bigger than all of us. We are facing catastrophic climate change, and the decisions that you make when reading our submissions, have a significant impact on all of our lives, and the lives of all generations to come, human and non-human alike.

There is so much potential for a better world. Victoria is leading the country in many ways, and we can continue this trend by being a leader in environmental policy. We can invest in renewables, stop cutting down our forests, create and undertake protection plans for endangered species, clean our waterways, and really build a society and culture of sustainability that can benefit all Victorians.

In order to make this happen, within the scope of this Inquiry, I have a few particular suggestions:

- We must consult Traditional Custodians in all aspects of land and water management, as well as decision-making in relation to their traditional lands, including traditional management practices such as cultural fire. Indigenous Australians have a wealth of knowledge relating to the Australian environment, and these Traditional Ecological Knowledges must be valued and considered. Declining ecosystems have profound implications for First Nations people, which makes their involvement mandatory.
- Victoria must pursue the engagement of treaty talks with Indigenous Victorians, and establish a Makarrata Commission for consultation with Traditional Owner bodies.
- The Victorian state government's commitment to a 2030 industry transition must be brought forward to the present moment, with the 2024 transition plan for workers beginning immediately. The bushfires have shown this to be a top priority. Two immediate actions to be taken are the protection of unburnt Greater Glider habitat, and a continued moratorium on logging in East Gippsland.
- Create the Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link conservation areas. We have been waiting long enough.
- Victoria's forests, as outlined, are a critical carbon storage resource. The Victorian state government must develop carbon accounting and policies that include forests.
- The creation of a new, entirely independent watchdog for the environment, especially with regard to forestry. Deforestation is not being adequately policed, this has been made very clear by the rampant illegality in State-owned logging operations. The EPA is insufficient in dealing with these issues, and has been turning a blind eye for far too long.
- 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.
- 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. This submission process is one very small step in the right direction. Consult more.

Thank you for your consideration of my submission. I appreciate the opportunity to be heard, and welcome any further discussion in your reply.

Regards,

Emily Wood Trounce

Written on Wurundjeri country, the land of the Kulin Nations. I pay my deepest respect to Wurundjeri elders, past, present, and emerging, and recognize their continuing sovereignty over this land which I call home. In any discussion of the ecology and environment in Victoria, we must recognize and respect the wealth of knowledge and wisdom imbued in the Traditional Owners of this land.