

My name is Janet Elizabeth Duncan.



I am wrting this in the hope that some decisive action will be taken by all levels of government to protect our unique native vegetation, wildlife, creeks, forests [and humans] from further damage.

Two of the National Parks that are very significant to me personally were damaged by wildfires last summer. Global warming was a known cause of these fires and eminent scientific opinion holds that forestry practices in East Gippsland were a significant factor in intensifying the fires that burned Cape Conran and the Croanjigalong National Park as well as many more locations that I am less familiar with.

In February 2018 I helped to organise a camp at Mount Buffalo for the Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists Club and was astounded to learn of the number of endemic plant species that occur only on the Mt Buffalo plateau. I have camped in summer at Lake Catani for many years and seen the damage caused by fires in the early 2000's. It was very difficult to learn that the National Park was again affected by fire and closed in the summer of 2019-20.

The increasing frequency and intensity of wild fires will be fatal for many alpine species. Global, national, state and local action on climate is imperative and urgent.

Closer to home I have seen large scale recent fires in 2009 and in March 2019 affect our local area. In 2009 local people were killed and houses lost. Last year a whole creek valley that my local landcare group had been revegetating was burned, as was a section of the Morwell National Park. Two local [human] families lost their homes and many of our genetically distinct South Gippsland or Strzelecki koala population appear to have starved as a consequence of the fires.

As a member of a landcare group hoping to restore habitat for wildlife, the fires make it very difficult for us to get local residents to accept that eucalypt trees are part of a functioning ecosystem. We understand that our local koalas may be the key to preserving the species, but they can only survive where there are suitable eucalyptus trees for them to eat. During and after the fires last year many old trees were cleared along roadsides in what were claimed to be safety measures, but looked on the ground more like revenge attacks.

In our work as a landcare group, we've also become very aware of the damage being done to the environment by feral deer. They are in our local National Park and doing untold damage to a patch of rare Strzelecki Warm Temperate Rainforest that we have recently discovered on a member's property. With only 86ha of this vegetation community known to be remaining on the face of the earth, and with so much of the East Gippsland rainforests burned beyond recognition, it's very difficult to see why stronger action isn't being taken by the State Governmet to declare deer to be a pest and to put strong eradication measures in place.

The forests that the deer are destroying may be hundreds if not thousands of years old. I don't know what the average life expectancy of a sporting shooter is, but I don't think their brief enjoyment of hunting should prevail over the needs of our ancient ecosystems.

Stripping funding and on-ground staff from Parks Victoria over many years also means that Morwell National Park is severely under-maintained and relies heavily on volunteers for basic track maintenance and weed control. The Friends group have so far been unable to get Parks Vic to take any action on deer. The claim is apparently that there are too many [human] entry points for safety.

I understand that Parks Vic can and do regularly close Sherbrooke Forest for deer control, so it has to just be a question of resources and priority being given to more spectacular or well visited parks. Morwell National Park has

one of the two protected areas of Strzelecki Warm Temperate Rainforest and the deer are smashing up the trees that host the most westerly known population of epiphytic Butterfly Orchids.

On my own property I have for many years been establishing habitat for native birds, only to find a constant parade of cats coming to predate them. It's hard to trap cats and other control measures are urgently needed.

When you live in the country, local government requirements to register, microchip, neuter or restrain cats seem to go unheeded. I often say that people think that the rule of law ends at the de-restriction signs on the roads. If you want to check this theory, just ask people about snakes. They will all have their particular "*I only kill them if...*" exemption from the well known prohibition on killing native wildlife. It's bizarre that we're not permitted to kill cats that are able to roam through our property and kill whatever native wildlife that they might fancy.

And then there's firewood. Illegal firewood harvesting is a wicked problem in our area. If, as reported, 10% of Victorian households rely on wood for heating, it's just too many. There are local amateurs getting wood for themselves, and then there are bigger commercial operations felling trees and selling wood allegedly "in Melbourne". These operatives are known to find security cameras and steal them before stealing wood by felling mature trees and using heavy equipment to take large sections at a time thus minimising the chances of detection.

Press reports this winter claimed that firewood was in heavy demand in Melbourne due to more people being at home during COVID-19 lockdown. So there are people out of work. There's a lucrative business. It's been a long, cold and wet winter. There's little respect for habitat or for native wildlife. It seems like a problem that needs to be solved at the demand end of the supply chain. This could be done by giving households better low-cost options for home insulation and heating. And regulating the use of wood burning appliances for heating, particularly in urban areas. Many inefficient wood heaters are also very bad for air quality. More attention also needs to be given to non-native species that can be burned. Woodlots. Trees that can be coppiced to re-grow.

The Strzelecki Ranges and the West and Central Gippsland area in general have well below the recommended percentage of natural environments set aside as reserves. Baw Baw Shire south of the M1 has even less than most. The existing reserves have increased visitation pressure on them from growing [human] populations and some such as the Holey Plains State Park have been recently burned by wildfires. More than 500 species of plants, some extremely rare, were known to grow in that Park. The adjoining pine plantation where that fire was aggressively fought seems to have emerged in better shape. Some of our smaller local reserves are under the putative management of Parks Vic but have no resources of on-ground staff or funds allocated to them.

Another area where the State Government could intervene for the good of the environment would be to require waterways to be fenced to prevent access by stock. Then, the government could review the rents it charges for grazing leases on Crown Land. If you listen to local environmental vandals who are laying waste to creek sides and old roads or railway reserves, it's not unusual to hear that people think that if they pay good money for a grazing lease, *By Crikey* they are going to graze it. Previously, when the leases were offered at a token rent, these areas were often left alone and the natural environment suffered less. I am fully aware of the argument that government shouldn't subsidise private businesses, but this is one area where a perverse outcome seems to have been achieved.

In conclusion, what I would like this enquiry to find is that as well as taking urgent action on global warming; urgent measures are put in place to protect eco-systems and habitat in order to protect threatened species and our natural environment. A species by species, area by area approach can see major loss of habitat by taking away a small percentage at a time of the known total area used by a species. We are about to lose a magnificent stand of supposedly protected ancient Strzelecki gums (*Eucalyptus strzeleckii*) on the Latrobe River at Tyers on the pretence that planting "offsets" in some way will replace the role these trees play in the environment. Enough of the escape clauses. If it needs protecting, why can't we just protect it?

The existing forestry practices that ignore, subvert or avoid even the current weak environmental controls also need to stop.

I, and many others like me spend much of our discretionary time on trying to learn about, restore and protect our natural environment. We do what we can as individuals and in groups, but without government action on climate, what we achieve will have less and less residual value. The area our group will plant over three years in our biggest Landcare project to date is probably less in the area than one VicForests machine destroys in a day. It was bad enough when Jeff Kennett gave [officially *leased*] huge tracts of our local state forests to the timber industry. Recently we found out that one local parliamentarian, Danny O'Brien, is opposed to timber plantations in principle and prefers to avoid any future shortage of timber by logging our national parks. He's not alone in that attitude.

There is a great deal that needs to be done and much urgent change is needed. I hope this enquiry can find a bold way forward.

Jay Duncan
26/8/20