

Submission: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Laura Kola [REDACTED]

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To: ecosystems <ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au>

To whom it may concern,

Please find below my submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Kind regards,
Laura Kola.

Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Committee

Into: **Ecosystem Decline in Victoria (NOT CONFIDENTIAL)**

22 May 2020

Dear Parliament Committee,

Victoria's natural environment holds a special place in my heart. From a young age my parents encouraged my love of nature and I recall frequent local trips down the Surfcoast and Great Ocean Road to hike and explore the beaches and forests. I have been fortunate enough to camp in many places in Victoria, including Wilson's Prom, Lerederg State Park, around Forrest and elsewhere in the Otway Ranges and Gariwerd. Wildlife encounters and the majesty of the ecosystems we explored on family camping trips kindled my passion for the environment and led me to complete environmental and forest ecosystem science studies and pursue a professional career in the field of conservation. I am a birdwatcher, hobby naturalist and interpretative nature guide outside of my professional pursuits.

However, my love for Victorian wildlife and nature is challenged by Australia's atrocious mammal extinction record – the worst of any developed nation. Even more so by the failure of the Australian and Victorian governments to prioritise the good health of our ecosystems for future generations to experience with the same delight as I have. The lack of wildlife that I encounter now in Geelong is in stark contrast to that which I experienced as a kid in the 1980s. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia and the destruction of grassland and wetland habitat (in particular) in recent decades for housing and road developments has shocked me. Since my daughter was born in 2016, I have ensured we camp each year somewhere in Victoria actively seeking wildlife encounters to help inform her understanding of the natural world and give meaning to the animals she knows from images and stories. Similarly, I have introduced her to a variety of ecosystems in the greater Geelong area on day trips or short trips away with the hope that she learns to appreciate and understand the importance of biodiversity from a young age (e.g. Balliyang Sanctuary, Buckley Falls Reserve, You Yangs Regional Park, Barwon Heads, Great Otway National Park, Apollo Bay, Alpine National Park and Warnambool). It saddens me to think that as she grows older, our choice of destinations that are in good health will dwindle further unless the Victorian government acts to protect our natural environment.

Australia's poor track record for conservation contrasts sharply with the importance of our country for biodiversity. High levels of endemism and unique and ancient ecosystems are what make our natural ecosystems so spectacular. Victoria cannot allow our terrestrial or marine ecosystems health to further decline with a clear conscience. Nor should the Victorian government rely on cash-strapped non-government organisations alone to care for our ecosystems.

With this inquiry, there exists a real opportunity for Victoria to become a national leader by prioritising and investing in our state's ecosystems health. Policy measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species actions that I identify for the Victorian government are:

1. comprehensive biodiversity monitoring and science-based action plans for endangered species and ecosystems,
2. scientifically-informed action based on any of the bushfire commission reports made in Victoria following devastating bushfire seasons,
3. an end to logging in old-growth forests in the near term and enforcing an immediate moratorium on salvage logging, and
4. preparing for increased extreme weather events due to climate change and their potential to further impact species and habitats at risk, including worsening bush fires seasons.

At the ground level, actions should include:

1. employing Victorians to carry out weed and invasive species eradication,
2. increased recognition of indigenous land management knowledge and traditional owners involvement in land management,
3. science-based ecosystem restoration projects, and
4. dedicated species recovery projects for our most threatened species (e.g. Alpine she-oak skink, Leadbeater's Possum, Orange-bellied parrot, Eastern barred bandicoot, Greater glider, Regent honeyeater, Plains wanderer, Southern right whale) and threatened habitats.

Respective State Governments of Victoria have contributed to and allowed the extinction of 18 mammals since European settlement. While we can't reverse that statistic, we can ensure it doesn't rise. Every species is precious and none should be sidelined by a cost-benefit analysis of the efforts required for their recovery. Cost-effective conservation is possible and becoming more so with improved knowledge and technological

advances in conservation methods, partnership approaches with landholders, conservation organisations, universities and (in the current climate particularly) the mobilisation of Victoria's willing unemployed residents.

As a conservationist, a nature lover and a Victorian with great hope for preventing further ecosystem health declines across our state, I urge you to ensure the outcomes of this inquiry are grounded in the available threatened species science and provide a strong, conservation-focused approach for Victoria to protect our treasured natural environments.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Kola.