



**From:** POV eSubmission Form <ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au>  
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**Subject:** New Submission to Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

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Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

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**SUBMISSION CONTENT:**

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Ecosystems around the planet are in crisis. The 2020 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) found “Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history – and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely...” Victoria is not immune.

This impact on human population of not acting on ecosystem decline now is extreme, as multiple Victorian, Australian and International Inquiries have already established. In light of this we do not need further inquiries or reports, we need action. The need to take action is urgent and essential. Solutions are available. Despite the challenges taking action will present, the cost of not taking action now is continuing degradation, leading to the ultimate collapse of systems that provide our air, water and food.

Please see attachment for my full response to this inquiry, with particular reference to the application in the area I live Nillumbik Shire.

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File1: [5f488a608c206-Ecosystem decline submission 28 8 20.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

## Response to the terms of reference for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline

### **Biodiversity decline, impacts on peoples and climate change.**

The impact on human population of not acting on bio-diversity decline now is extreme. As we battle Covid-19 it has become evident that increasing pressures on nature from wildlife exploitation and our unsustainable food systems increase the likelihood of future pandemics. (WWF 2020)

#### **Nillumbik**

Despite being committed to protecting and improving Nillumbik's biodiversity and productivity as demonstrated in the Nillumbik Environmental Charter, the pressure of incremental loss of vegetation across Nillumbik is significant. Land clearing continues to occur at a faster rate than revegetation. Waterways are in poor shape, and the quality of "significant roadsides" in the Shire have been downgraded (Nillumbik Shire 2014).

Associate Professor Randall Robinson – Deputy Director of the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University Research, Victoria University Melbourne confirms that biodiversity is "*in decline in Nillumbik with a wide range of evidence that cannot be ignored*". Evidence includes

- out of control proliferation of noxious weeds such as Chilean Needle Grass, Serrated Tussock, Boneseed and Sweet Pittosporum
- prevalence of introduced invertebrate pests, exacerbated by many of the introduced weeds, directly impacting on many of our native species.
- Decline of native insect species
- The decline in nectar-producing plants in the Shire, leading to a decline in small, nectar-feeding birds
- Decline in stream flows and creek biota because of upstream water harvesting into legal and illegal dams;
- The general drying of the climate which has led to shifts in most plant and animal communities throughout Australia, including in Nillumbik, with sharp declines in some notable groups of species including Orchids.

Analysis of the Nillumbik region from the Climate Change in Australia website shows that the Nillumbik Shire (and around Melbourne more broadly) will be significantly affected by a warming climate. Using two emissions scenarios (Moderate and High) the models project that there will be a rise in annual temperatures, including an increase in the summer maximum, and a decline in rainfall, with winter and spring rainfall declining disproportionately. This will impact on the species that make up our vegetation communities and further impact our creeks and rivers. The creeks, rivers and wetlands will be of even greater importance in providing refuges for species needing wetter and cooler environments. (Australian Government 2019)

The areas of remnant vegetation in Nillumbik are at ongoing risk from continued gradual degradation and loss on both private and public land. The causes include competition from pest plants, lack of regeneration to replace ageing plants, and deliberate destruction and clearance related to development including the construction of access roads. Subdivision of large rural properties for residential purposes altering the hydrology of the area, leads to fragmentation of habitat, which directly affects biodiversity through habitat loss and disturbances associated with construction and urban land use such as pets and non-indigenous plantings.

### **Adequacy of current protections**

#### **General**

The current legislative framework is inadequate, as demonstrated by the ongoing decline of eco-systems and biodiversity. The DEWLP report (2017) identified that *Despite understanding the importance of our natural environment, not enough has been done to protect it from harm.* (pg 1)

Specific elements of the current legislative framework that need strengthening are reporting, monitoring and accountability. There is no value in having strong regulations regarding actions if there is no capacity to monitor compliance, require accountability nor impose consequences for inappropriate actions.

If long term planning is to be successful, it needs to be independent of politics. Successive governments have a history of cease, wind backing or changing previous government findings/projects. Progress also stalls when new inquiries are commissioned despite previous findings and reports being available.

## **Nillumbik**

There are many examples of habitat loss and eco-system decline owing to lack of monitoring and accountability and lack of continuity across successive Councils in Nillumbik.

In the recent review of the Nillumbik Green Wedge Management Plan, Shire officers did not adhere to the State Government requirements stated in Practice Note 31 and State Government officers did not intervene. The resulting Nillumbik GWMP 2019 gives far less protection to eco-systems than the GWMP it replaced.

In 2017 Nillumbik Council cancelled the review of Environmental Significant Overlays (ESO) in the Green Wedge and replaced the initiative with nothing in the new Green Wedge Management Plan (GWMP). ESO4 for protection of waterways was totally left out of the GWMP, but landowners along creek/river were, according to the new GWMP, still allowed to "divert or extract water" from creeks even though this **contradicts State Government Melbourne Water policy**.

## **Adequacy of current government programs**

### **Nillumbik**

Green Wedges, the "lungs of Melbourne", are crucial to conserve native vegetation and wildlife habitat and to limit uncontrolled urban sprawl. Across Melbourne there are 12 Green Wedges. Nillumbik's green wedge is the most pristine and best preserved. Green Wedges are constantly under threat. Every planning permit should be reviewed by an Officer with an understanding of both the planning scheme and the local environment. Many municipalities have no environmental expertise thus the oversight is inadequate.

In 2009 much of Nillumbik Council's Green Wedge was devastated by the bushfires.

The State Government have introduced new Bushfire Management Overlays and discourage rebuilding in such areas. However, with the newly appreciated huge loss of biodiversity the clearing of bush, including under storey, in the name of bushfire prevention can be counterproductive as well as being totally disastrous for biodiversity of flora and fauna.

The state government Bushfire Management Overlays (BOM) are being abused. There are examples of developers buying property in leafy urban areas such as Eltham and Diamond Creek and subsequently removing the trees around the dwelling under the 10/30 rule associated with the BOM over Eltham and Diamond Creek townships. This is done so that there are no trees or other vegetation to restrict the size of the new building. Eltham in particular is being transformed to look like solid buildings with all indigenous trees gone. The State Planning Scheme needs to be changed to prevent this abuse from continuing to happen.

## **Possible solutions**

We need action, not more reports or data collection exercises.

### **General**

All solutions should be informed by consultations with First Peoples, the Traditional Custodians of this land. Opportunities should be available for people to meet and learn about Traditional culture and knowledge, and to explore ways they can support the Traditional custodians of this land to reconnect to Country and traditional practices.

There is an urgent need to strengthen Victoria's Planning Provisions in relation to the Rural Conservation Zone and the Green Wedge Zone. The RCZ in particular is the one State-wide rural zone that has a specific focus on conservation of natural vegetation communities and habitats.

There is growing pressure for built development in the Rural Conservation Zone and Green Wedge Zone and the current planning provisions are not strong enough to stop a cumulative deleterious impact on biodiversity values resulting in the deterioration, fragmentation and loss of indigenous vegetation communities and habitat.

All strategies for protecting eco-systems should take into account the 'precautionary principle' (Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. It states that *'where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation'*.

Prevention is better than cure. Protecting ecosystems from damage is far more cost-effective than attempting rehabilitation once the damage is done. Some ecosystem changes and losses of biodiversity (for example, extinctions) can never be overcome.

Programs should include community engagement activities, including with Traditional Owners, to bring people together to find common ground such as the place they share, to find common interests and learn together to build understanding and respect for each other's aspirations, differences and constraints.

### **Nillumbik**

Important actions that can be taken in Nillumbik to maximise the resilience of the natural environment to the effects of climate changes are to:

- Establish ambitious targets
- protect and enhance existing native habitats,
- reconnect isolated patches of bush by planting linking corridors of appropriate native species,
- improve the health of the land by reducing the impacts of the other identified threats – weeds, feral pest animals, erosion, habitat loss etc, and
- reduce extraction of water from rivers and creeks.

Consult with local people. Nillumbik has eleven Landcare and twenty-two Friends Groups. Volunteers in these groups are involved in activities such as planting, weed control, mulching, plant and animal monitoring and water quality monitoring. The Inquiry should consult with Landcare and "Friends of" groups who work in both the Green Wedge and the urban areas of Nillumbik to understand the local issues and ensure any programs arising from the Inquiry complement approaches already underway.

Nillumbik would benefit from improved communication and cohesion between all levels of government and instrumentalities. The Nillumbik Shire is essentially bordered on the eastern side by the Yarra River and the western side by the Plenty River with the Diamond Creek of its tributaries fully within Nillumbik before it joins the Yarra River in Eltham. Different state and local government agencies have jurisdiction over various parts of these waterways and enforcement is often contradictory or neglected. It is important that there is effective communication between government, water authorities, and community in order to achieve better outcomes for our waterways. It has been reported that a frequent scenario occurring is confusion (between local council, water authorities, and land owners) over responsibility for managing creeks and associated buffer zones.

### **COVID green recovery**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant inequalities in our community and provided the impetus for people to reassess values. The importance of access to fresh air and contact with nature have been realised on a mass scale. In this context initiatives to promote employment through biodiversity repair should be a priority for COVID19 recovery, state money, and such action will receive widespread community support. Employment and volunteer programs for "climate change impacts;" should be a priority for COVID19 recovery at all levels: Federal, State, Local Government.

### **Nillumbik**

Indigenous Ranger and Protected Area programs are proven success stories, not only for the health of natural heritage but for the lives of Indigenous people. This program is largely funded through the Federal Working on Country program, however extending this program to peri-urban areas such as Nillumbik which is still home to important pockets of flora and fauna, would offer cultural, environmental and economic benefit. COVID recovery could provide the opportunity to trial the program in diverse settings.

There is also an excellent opportunity to combine the needs of Biodiversity protection, pest control, weed infestation, research into climate change needs, by including employees doing formal part time education courses, so that after COVID19 these people have the skills and knowledge to stay working in the environmental field.

## **References**

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