

Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline

Submission by Ann McGregor, August 2020

I welcome this inquiry and hope it will lead to urgent and effective Government action to address the extinction crisis that Victoria is facing.

My submission is confined to two aspects of the term of reference **d** (solutions):

1. Baiting for feral cat control, and
2. The need for vastly increased funding.

1. FERAL CAT CONTROL

Feral cats are recognised as the main threat to Australia's native fauna:

The Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy identifies tackling feral cats as its top priority for action. ...Feral cats have contributed to the extinction of at least 28 mammal species since they first arrived in Australia, and they continue to wreak havoc. They imperil around a third of our threatened mammals, reptiles, frogs and birds. We need new tools, approaches and partnerships to limit their impact.

(Australian Government Dept of Agriculture, Water & the Environment website <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/factsheet-tackling-feral-cats> accessed 4/3/2020.)

An estimated 316 million native birds are killed by feral cats each year in Australia (Woinarski et al., (2017) *Biological Conservation* Vol.214, pp76-87).

In Victoria, *Forty-three Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 listed threatened species are at increased risk of extinction as a direct result of feral cats...Feral cats can also carry diseases, which can be transmitted to native animals, domestic livestock and humans.*

(Agriculture Victoria website <http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/farm-management/chemicals/baiting-1080-and-papp/papp-bait-for-feral-cat-control> accessed 4/3/2020.)

Predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under section 188 of Australia's national environment law, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

All governments have agreed to control feral cats:

At the Meeting of Environment Ministers (Melbourne, 15 July 2015), Ministers endorsed the National declaration of feral cats as pests. As part of this declaration, Ministers agreed to review arrangements within their respective jurisdictions and, where necessary, to remove unnecessary barriers to effective and humane control of feral cats. Ministers also agreed to consider feral cat management as a priority in threatened species recovery programs

<https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive-species/feral-animals-australia/feral-cats>

A humane, targeted bait has been developed

A bait product for the control of declared feral cats was registered by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority in early 2020. The bait product contains the active constituent PAPP (para-aminopropiophenone) and is called *Curiosity Feral Cat Bait*. The registrant of the product is the Australian Government Department of Environment and Energy. Curiosity® was developed through a long-term \$5.1 million project to develop a humane, broad-scale toxic bait that specifically targets feral cats. The toxicant, PAPP is considered best-practice world-wide. It converts the animal's red blood cells to a form that cannot carry oxygen, causing death through oxygen starvation to the brain and other vital organs. It is considered to be humane and death takes minutes to hours. The RSPCA have indicated that PAPP is a clear improvement in humaneness over previous toxins. The mode of action

means that secondary poisoning of any other animals from consuming a carcass of a cat that ate a Curiosity® bait is much less likely than when using previously employed toxins. (From Aust Govt Dept Agriculture, Water & Environment website.)

But in Victoria, the bait can only be used on specified Crown land

The new PAPP bait for feral cats is not be [sic] available to the general public,,,,Feral cats are only a declared species on specified Crown land. Therefore, the control of feral cats can only occur on specified Crown land. Specified Crown land is Crown land managed by Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Parks Victoria, Phillip Island Nature Park and the four Alpine Resorts, other than excluded Crown land.

(Agriculture Victoria website <http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/farm-management/chemicals/baiting-1080-and-papp/papp-bait-for-feral-cat-control>)

Apparently, these restrictions on use of the bait are designed to protect roaming pets. This ignores the widespread and growing acceptance of the need to prevent pets from roaming, both for their own safety and because they are likely to hunt and kill wildlife. Note that many Victorian municipal councils have introduced cat curfews.

The Victorian Environment Minister agreed in 2015 “to remove unnecessary barriers to effective and humane control of feral cats”. Action on this is urgent.

Recommendations:

- 1. Feral cats should be a declared established pest species everywhere in Victoria.**
- 2. Curiosity® bait & other approved controls should be available for use by trained users on private land and all public land.**

2. FUNDING TO ADDRESS ECOSYSTEM DECLINE: a matter of priorities

Australia spends approximately \$122 million/year on threatened species¹. The USA, with a similar number to Australia of listed threatened species, spent at least \$2.1 billion per year from 2011-2016 – with impressive results in terms of species recovery. The cost of improving the status of all threatened species in Australia to the point of removing them from the at-risk list, has been conservatively estimated at \$1.69 billion/year. (Wintle, B. et al. ‘Spending to save: What will it cost to halt Australia’s extinction crisis?’ *Conservation Letters* Vol 12 No 6 Nov-Dec 2019 <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/conl.12682>.) This refers to targeted expenditure on currently threatened species, not broader investment in ecosystem health to address current and emerging threats.

In contrast to the very limited public funding for native plant and animal species that are threatened with extinction, Australians spend over \$13 billion per year on pet food, accessories and medical treatment for their pets (Animal Medicines Australia (2019) *Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people*, p.34).

Government agencies in Victoria are grossly under-resourced to adequately tackle ecosystem decline and looming extinctions. Community organisations that are addressing these issues receive limited government support. **It’s not a matter of financial capacity in Victoria, it is a matter of priorities for public expenditure.** In my view, the current meagre level of investment in nature conservation in comparison with other budget items is simply disgraceful.

A few figures to compare and contrast, and put the priorities situation in perspective:

¹ Public expenditure estimate across Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions over recent years.

- In 2018 the State Government allocated \$225 million towards significant upgrades of the AFL-owned stadium in Docklands, “to ensure its future as a world-class sporting and entertainment venue”. This investment is not a role of government and does not address any market failure. The Victorian Government spent approximately \$11.3 million on targeted threatened species in 2018-19 (Wintle et al. 2019, cited above – supplementary information table S2.)
- Of a total \$11.4 billion in output initiatives in the 2019-20 Victorian Budget, the only one under the Environment & Biodiversity heading that relates to biodiversity was \$0.5 million to expand the hours of operation of the Wildlife Victoria hotline. I would suggest that this supports a metaphorical ambulance at the bottom of the cliff for injured wildlife, but does nothing to sustain ecosystems and ecological communities. Parks Victoria received an Output Initiative of \$6.9 million to ‘maintain park ranger positions’. Surely maintaining positions should be covered in recurrent funding? (*Victorian Budget 19/20: Service Delivery*. Budget Paper No. 3, p.39)
- In the 2019-20 Victorian Budget, \$38.3 million was allocated to boost jobs and investment in the racing industry. A further \$64.1 million is allocated over the next three years. Again, there is no evidence of market failure nor is it the role of government to spend taxpayers’ money on prizemoney for wealthy racehorse owners. Only a very small proportion of the Victorian community is interested in horse or greyhound racing.
- The Budget allocated \$15.8 billion to the North East Link to “cut travel times by up to 35 minutes”, but only \$2.7 million in grants to rural and regional councils “to manage the spread of weeds and pests and protect Victoria’s agricultural industry”.
- Despite repeated requests from government agency the Trust for Nature for a grant from Treasury of \$20-40 million to increase the capacity of the Trust’s rolling fund to purchase, covenant and then resell land of high conservation value, the Government and Treasury have ignored this funding request.

The Treasurer stated that “removing level crossings is a project that has defined the Andrews Labor Government” (*Victorian Budget 19/20: Treasurer’s Speech*. Budget Paper No. 1). The Budget includes \$6.6 billion to remove another 25 level crossings. Is another legacy of the Andrews Labor Government going to be widespread ecological degradation with many species on an extinction trajectory? Or will serious amounts of funding be allocated to nature conservation and ecological recovery in Victoria, in order to protect our irreplaceable natural heritage?

Recommendations:

- 1. That a realistic estimate be prepared for the funding needed to improve the status of all threatened species in Victoria to the point of removing them from the at-risk list. This estimate should be the basis for multi-year State Budget allocations.**
- 2. Parks Victoria’s operational budget for the conservation management of the State’s protected areas should be increased to 1% of the State Budget.**
- 3. That the Trust for Nature receive \$40 million (once-off) to expand their rolling fund for land purchase, conservation covenanting and resale.**