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Submission

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

The Friends of Mallacoota is a long established environment group of 150 members resident in or with strong links to Mallacoota in Far East Gippsland. The area is on the coast surrounded by Croajingolong National Park. It is a popular holiday destination renowned for its natural environment.

Long before the bushfires that devastated the area in December 2019 and the beginning of this year it was obvious that the local environment was in decline. A prolonged drought had badly depleted the rivers and lakes, vegetation was suffering and this was having a flow on effect to native fauna. It is important to emphasise that the root cause of this was climate change. The State Government is well aware of how to tackle this.

Over a number of years regular quarterly monitoring of birds across six different habitats of Mallacoota and the surrounding district have shown a marked decline in numbers across most species.

The extent of the decline in biodiversity has been well documented in scientific journals and by the Government's own instrumentalities for many years, so will not be quoted at length in this submission. Some ways in which the State Government can address environmental problems are outlined below.

Logging and Vegetation Clearing

As long ago as the 1850s Ferdinand von Mueller, Director of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens, was pointing out that deforestation was harming the local ecology and soil quality and reducing rainfall, and he called upon the public to "remember why the absence of or destruction of forests involves periodic floods and droughts." Unfortunately his advice still goes unheeded.

The most obvious and detrimental effects on the local environment are logging and the continual clearing of native vegetation. The environmentally detrimental practices and illegal activities of VicForests have been well publicised, even more so of late. It shows both major political parties in a bad light as they have allowed a Government instrumentality to destroy so much of our natural heritage and to actually subsidise VicForests to do it. Although there are plans to phase out some logging in the future the situation is so dire that it needs to be stopped now. The situation is all the more urgent given the unprecedented destruction of the recent bushfires throughout East Gippsland.

Plantation timber is available right now for harvesting and although this is a more expensive option given that State owned forests are virtually cost free it should be utilised immediately. RFAs do not factor in climate change or the cumulative effects of logging and bushfires. Water supplies, recreation and tourism are not considered. The latter is of particular concern in East Gippsland.

Salvage logging after the recent fires shows opportunistic and environmentally disruptive behaviour. The removal of both living and dead trees stops regeneration and further threatens biodiversity. Hollows for nesting birds and mammals are destroyed in the process.

VicRoads and Rural Roads Victoria show little respect for roadside vegetation, most recently with the duplication of the highway to South Australia and in outer suburban Melbourne. Offsetting is often used as a ruse to obtain permission to destroy valuable habitat in one area by promising to protect an already existing area of vegetation. Obviously this means a net loss of vegetation.

Clearing of native vegetation on private land, both legal and illegal, is a continuing process. Permission for the former is too readily given, and prosecutions for the latter are rare. Habitat fragmentation which results from such clearing restricts many animal species from occupying new territories and subsequently makes them easy prey as well restricting gene flow leading to inbreeding problems.

National Parks

Living in Mallacoota the benefits of national parks are self-evident, bringing thousands of tourists here each year to enjoy our natural environment. However the fires that destroyed so much of the environment and the town need not have been so severe had Parks Victoria and DELWP been better staffed and funded. As has occurred State wide, cutbacks over many years have left only skeleton crews to manage huge and complex areas of forests, heathlands and coastal areas. The few specialist scientists currently employed cannot be expected to oversee requirements such as those legislated for under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act where so many endangered species have no management plans or recovery action plans. The same applies to requirements under the EPBC Act and many other necessary scientific studies.

In Mallacoota some time ago DELWP actually sold off a considerable area of public coastal land to a group of people who wanted to establish a golf club. It was believed at the time that the Department had too much land to manage. Large swathes of native vegetation were removed over the years despite public concern, and following the recent fires burnt vegetation was cleared before it had a chance to recover, right down to the edge of the boundary line. There is now evidence of erosion because of the bare earth. Our coastal lands should be properly looked after by qualified staff, not disposed of to private organisations.

Another similar instance occurred when Parks Victoria ceded control of a popular coastal strip to the local council. The beach areas are nesting sites for the endangered Hooded Plovers and other wader species. Officially dogs are banned from the beaches during nesting season but despite promises from East Gippsland Shire Council there is no Compliance Officer resident in Mallacoota at a time when there are thousands of tourists here. Birds are constantly harassed by dogs and many nests fail because of this. If PV had maintained control the situation would be quite different.

There is increased pressure to open National Parks to commercial interests. Giving priority to the development of tourism infrastructure in our parks over protection of biodiversity and endangered species should be strongly resisted.

Invasive species

Invasive animal pest species cause havoc with native animals and plants. Feral cats and foxes prey on a wide range of mammals, birds, and reptiles. Rabbits and Sambar Deer are responsible for damaging forests and plantings by local residents. Since the bushfires the surviving native animals are in greater danger of being predated due to lack of habitat, and deer are seen even in urban areas and beaches as they search for food and compete with native species. This situation could be better controlled by investing more funds into full time staff and qualified contractors.

Population

It is a function of population increase that consumption of natural resources also increases. More land is cleared, more timber is needed and water and power are consumed. It is commonly argued that this is what is responsible for our economic wellbeing, while other schools of thought point to the increasing damage being done to our environment, quality of life and physical and mental health. Urban sprawl is eating up land needed for food production. Given this it is surprising that the Victorian government does not have a population policy. Long term quality of life and welfare of residents needs to be addressed by a properly constituted inquiry which considers all aspects of the ideal population size for Victoria and how this is best achieved.

Conclusion

As this State's biodiversity continues to decline the State Government has within its power the ability to arrest this. The key to bringing this about is making considerably more funding available as outlined above and taking bold legislative steps to protect our future. The longer the delay the more costly it will be to remedy the situation in the future.

Rosemary Martin
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