

29/8/2020

Dear Sir/MS

I am a semi retired business manager, grandmother, and a Victorian who loves the mountains, deserts, coast and bush of this state.

It is with deep concern that I write to ask you to address the loss of biodiversity in our beautiful state.

The value of our native flora and fauna and our wild coast, must not be undervalued or neglected. Not only are they of great economic value but they also have immeasurable value to our sense of well being, joy, spirituality and emotional healing.

I love our deserts, the grandeur of Gariwerd, our spectacular mountains, the wispy, secretive grasslands of the basalt plains and our fabulous rugged coast; but when I feel sad, despondent, frustrated or generally fed up with life or humanity, I think of Croajingalong National Park, in particular Wingan Inlet. I can put myself there - in the Inlet, at the rapids, on the beach in the many different parts of the bush and fairly quickly life and the world seems better. Just thinking about its wildness and beauty heals my heart and my soul.

For more than 30 years my family and I have holidayed at Wingan inlet. Over that time I have witnessed many changes in the ecosystem. What was once a semi-wet sclerophyll forest gradually became drier. The sea-grass, which once covered the whole inlet disappeared about twenty years ago and has never returned. The bush area used to be permanently damp and was managed by park rangers who were consistently on site during the summer period. It is now rare to see a ranger in the park area. The drier conditions in the bush obviously resulted in large amounts of dried and dead timber. Thus the devastating bush fire last summer was no surprise; I have been waiting for it to happen for years. Nevertheless I spent most of January either crying or on the verge of tears. The place I love most in the world was destroyed.

We pride ourselves on being the progressive state but we have one of the worst records of environmental degradation and loss of habitat and species. Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by sub region in Australia (and Australia has the worst record of species extinction in the world).

More than 25% of our Wetlands have gone and what remains is mostly in poor condition. Whilst we are signatories to the Ramsar Convention, there has been inadequate funding to maintain and manage most of these precious, fragile sites; and there is considerable lack of compliance in maintaining them. We must stop large developments in and near Ramsar Wetlands (e.g. the proposed AGL LNG pipeline in Westernport Bay). We must also fund better management of these important sites to ensure our compliance with international agreements and to maintain, protect and extend these ecosystems.

Unique grasslands and grassy Eucalypt forests once covered 30% of Victoria. Today only 2-5% remains, in small pockets. These are one of the most endangered ecosystems in Australia. There have been promises and policies to buy grassland areas for protection for more than 10 years. To date this has largely not occurred. Grasslands sequester carbon at the same rate as trees. These precious ecosystems need to be preserved and protected with substantial buffer zones. That means investing money and other resources for their purchase and protection.

Resources and funds have been cut from National Parks. Our National Parks are home to 92% of our native plant species and more than 78% of our native fauna species. There are about 50 million visits to National Parks and state parks per annum, generating \$2.1 billion p.a. and 20,000 jobs. National Parks are good for the economy, people and nature. But they need to be better funded and resourced. There needs to be an increase in funding to at least 1% of annual state expenditure. We need to improve and increase biodiversity programs, create new National Parks, (e.g. Wombat Forest, the Central Uplands and in South West Victoria). The government needs to support community engagement in National Parks, for example by encouraging and supporting 'Friends' groups.

Little attention has been paid to global warming and climate change and the associated impact on ecosystems or species. There is no doubt that the devastating fires of last summer and the summer before are the result of climate change. Our forests and our bushland have dried and when those extreme bushfires occur our flora, fauna, microflora and microfauna cannot survive. Friends reassured me in February that the bush would bounce back, but they were only thinking of the large trees they see as they drive down the highway. In reality the biggest damage of the fires is what they do to the soil and its living organisms, and to the small reptiles, insects, birds, grasses, small rare plants, native fish, sea grass etc etc. Our government needs to take real action to address the issue of climate change by adopting a just transition to renewables, providing assistance to farmers to adopt environmentally safe practices, improve public transport etc. Government should end permits to onshore gas mining and set Victoria's emissions targets as soon as possible.

Our biodiversity is also compromised by a number of invasive plants and animals. Government needs to declare various animal (e.g. deer, feral cats, wild horses, pigs) and plant species pests, and fund programs to remove them and mitigate their impacts.

Our native forests need to be protected. Logging of our beautiful old growth forests must stop. We need these trees to ensure biodiversity and habitat for myriad plants and animals. They are essential in minimising species loss and the protection of our environment from climate change. They are also essential to the physical and psychological health of our population.

Lost areas of rich biodiversity are irreplaceable. While we can sometimes plant major tree species and the like, the bushland that results is never the same as so many smaller plants, fungi, etc don't regenerate. Once an ecosystem is gone it never comes back. As informed citizens of the world our responsibility to this vast beautiful, fragile land and future generations is to protect and preserve what is left of unique wild ecosystems and do what we can to repair the damage we have previously done.

Right now we have an opportunity to repair some damage. Some species are gone forever but if we don't take the opportunity now to fund, resource and employ people to improve the future of this state's biodiversity we may miss a great opportunity and instead bequeath a sad and terrible future to our grandchildren and their children.

Yours sincerely

Christine Cook

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