

Submission to Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria

I have been a full-time resident of Mallacoota in Far East Gippsland since retiring 10 years ago and lost my house in the recent bushfires. I have a long term interest in conservation and the environment. I was employed as a bush regenerator in Melbourne's eastern suburbs by the National Trust and a private company, and as the co-ordinator of Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater for six years. During this time I was a member of the Helmeted Honeyeater Recovery Team. I was an active committee member in a number of nature orientated voluntary organisations in the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges. I also edited a 12 -14 page monthly environmentally focused newsletter for 16 years.

For many years I have witnessed the decline of Victoria's ecosystems throughout the State. This has occurred primarily because of increasing climate change. If this situation is to be halted and reversed it is imperative that greenhouse gases be drastically reduced. Primarily this can be brought about by phasing out coal and gas, but also by reforming our transport systems, diet and consumption patterns. I am certain that any informed and intelligent member of the Environment and Planning Committee would be aware of this, so I will mainly address other areas that are relevant to biodiversity decline.

The loss of native vegetation is the most obvious problem that effects our natural environment. Logging by VicForests is low-hanging fruit that could be remedied quickly and effectively. This government subsidised instrumentality has consistently proved itself to be not only unsustainable and ecologically damaging but also unprofitable. There is ample plantation timber available which should be utilised.

Following the recent bushfires so-called salvage logging has and is taking place in East Gippsland on an unsustainable scale. Scientists have condemned this on the grounds that the forests should be left to recover for several years to allow epicormic growth to occur and for seeds to germinate. Damage to remaining understorey plants and soil compaction will inhibit recovery and allow weeds to become established.

Private land is also being cleared for lifestyle hobby farms and agriculture. It is far too easy to obtain permission for this, and illegal vegetation destruction seldom ends up in court.

Destruction of native wildlife is also rarely investigated let alone prosecuted. In the rare instances when matters do come to court the penalties are laughable, as in the case of the poisoning of over 400 Wedge-tailed Eagles in East Gippsland in 2018. The Wildlife Act of 1975 needs an urgent overhaul. The fact that Victoria allows a duck hunting season following a prolonged drought and unprecedented bushfires shows that decisions are still being made based on political considerations and not science.

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act should be given sufficient funding so that it can adequately accomplish what it was set up to do. Recovery Action Plans and Management Plans are missing in action. To protect our environment it should be taken out of the hands of politicians.

Permits to kill kangaroo species by landholders are also too easily granted. I vividly remember that when I lived in the Yarra Valley the new owners of a hobby farm were allowed to shoot a long established herd of kangaroos because they wanted to keep some Shetland ponies on the property.

Invasive plants and animals play a big part in our declining ecosystems. Environmental weeds outcompete native species thereby often forcing them to local extinction and diminishing the food and shelter for native animals.

Introduced cats, foxes and feral dogs prey on native wildlife, often resulting in local or complete extinction. Uncontrolled domestic cats and dogs also contribute hugely to killing our indigenous species. Cat curfews should operate state wide, and where there are still abundant native and rare species cats and dogs should be prohibited. This already operates successfully in some areas of Victoria.

National parks should be increased and adequately funded. More staff should be employed to properly maintain them and to run educational programs. The severity of the recent bushfires could have been reduced had sufficient rangers been allocated to run our parks efficiently. Budgets for parks have been markedly reduced over the years and now society has had to pay the price.

Conservation and Friends Of groups should be given training and equipment to assist in weed management and planting in parks (and I do not mean giving out baseball caps and water bottles with Parks Vic logos!). Citizen science should also be actively encouraged.

If the state of Victoria is really serious about stopping the decline of our biodiversity then it must immediately address the above. A government slogan states: Healthy Parks Healthy People: obviously this is not the case at present.

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