

Submission to Inquiry Into Ecosystem Decline In Victoria

Introduction and context for this submission

I am a research scientist in biochemistry and a concerned citizen. I experience profound grief at the extent and impact of the extinction and climate crises, and overwhelming frustration at the lack of political will, and inadequate legal and regulatory mechanisms to addresses these intertwined crises. We can create a society that better respects and protects its people and natural resources, but we need our state government to assist with leadership, funding and regulation.

I am a member of the Friends of Merri Creek and an active volunteer in their bird surveys, planting days, hand weeding and rubbish pick-ups. The habitat along Merri Creek exists because of the concerted effort of local residents in the 1970s (1) to save the creek from development into a freeway. Since then, thousands of people have worked to restore the native habitat for flora and fauna and connect the people of inner and outer northern suburbs of Melbourne to nature. In 2003, Friends of Merri Creek lost a Federal Court case against the Commonwealth plan for an outer northern suburbs freeway with significant impact on the creek (2). The creek is still threatened by residential development and industrial waste (3). My local efforts at protecting and restoring my local environment pale in comparison to the loss we are experiencing at the state, national and international scale. Even as I enjoy the Merri Creek, I worry about the loss being experienced by people and the environment as the North East Link is built (4). Conversely, during the COVID-19 lockdowns I've felt and seen the joy that Merri Creek and its indigenous flora and fauna has provided to local residents and hope that as restrictions ease more people will work to protect and regenerate native habitats across the state.

Our dependence on healthy green space for good mental and physical health has never been more obvious. Stuck inside for the better part of five months, I have been simultaneously yearning and grieving for nature and humanity. For Victoria to emerge from this COVID-19 crisis without seriously addressing the climate and extinction crises we face would be a calamity.

Impact of Biodiversity Decline on People and Ecosystems, Including Climate Change Impacts

Victoria is the most cleared land in the country, with 66% cleared of native habitat. It is difficult to comprehend what has already been lost as most of it occurred before I was even born. Imagine the horror of First Nations people pre-colonisation and all past residents of Victoria since colonisation at the scale of environmental destruction that we accept as normal. Native vegetation is being lost at a rate of 4000 hectares per year and Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by subregion in Australia, with over 700 species and ecological communities listed (5). It is imperative that we protect what remains for the health of people living now and for future generations.

The impacts of the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires on threatened species and habitats are still being quantified, but the destruction of human life, our communities, native habitat and threatened species by these fires demonstrates the impact of climate change. Measures to protect our biodiversity and ecosystems will fail without a rapid transition from fossil

Submission to Inquiry Into Ecosystem Decline In Victoria

fuels to renewable and sustainable sources of energy locally, nationally and internationally. Every new fossil fuel project in the state worsens the future of people and ecosystems.

Adequacy of Legislative Framework

The inadequacy of the legislative framework is obvious in the failure of the State Government to protect the Western Grasslands. The government has failed to acquire 90% of the 15,000 hectares of land containing remnant grasslands habitat that should have been purchased between 2010 and 2020. 56% of the grasslands habitat remaining in 1985 had already been lost to urban development or degradation by 2000, underscoring the urgency of protecting what remains (6).

Legislation at the State and Federal level is clearly inadequate if it cannot ensure the rapid and strict protection of Victoria's Natural Temperate Grasslands (98% lost since colonisation) and Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands (95% lost since colonisation) listed as critically endangered under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) (6).

Solutions to Facilitate Ecosystem and Species Protection

As I have witnessed along the Merri Creek, people and communities value green spaces and native habitat, especially when they are cared for and there are opportunities for people to enjoy and contribute to their preservation and regeneration. Our state must put caring for people and the environment at the centre of our recovering plans for COVID-19.

Our State's over reliance on often insecure work has been exposed during the COVID-19 crisis, with women, young people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds working in service jobs hit the hardest. Investment in work, projects and infrastructure that cares for and protects our native habitats and reduces our dependence on fossil fuels can contribute to our recovery from COVID-19 and strengthen our community and our state in several ways:

- Provide good, safe, secure and meaningful employment in caring for people and our environment
- Support First Nations people and communities who are already caring for country but are not provided with the appropriate pay or the resources to expand their work
- Provide jobs across all regions of the state
- Build a more resilient and sustainable economy
- Preserve and enhance our environment for future generations
- Strengthen our communities by building connections between First Nations people and non-Indigenous people, including recent migrants, based on our shared stewardship and enjoyment of the native environment

Opportunities to Restore Victoria's Environment

Proposals for restoring Victoria's environment are abundant, coming from academics, environmental organisations, concerned citizens and some politicians. What gives me great hope is that the best of these proposals focus on the connection between humans and the environment, and demonstrate that we are at our best when we centre caring for each

Submission to Inquiry Into Ecosystem Decline In Victoria

other and the environment. What is missing is political will, political vision and sustained, targeted and generous government investment.

Dr Adrian Marshall outlines a vision for a well-designed reserve that makes the Western Grasslands the jewel of Melbourne's urban environment (7).

At a Threatened Species Day event in 2019 I heard academics talk about their work in protecting threatened species, from improving the gene pools of glider species to discovering a long-lost grasshopper species in a cemetery. What made the greatest impression on me was how little Australian governments invest in the protection of threatened species and how much difference money and a plan for saving threatened species would make.

I agree broadly with proposals for the Victorian Greens to create:

- A huge program of habitat restoration, including weed and invasive species eradication
- A dedicated program for reviving species facing extinction
- An end to habitat destruction and strengthened nature laws. We need to:
 - o End native forest logging and transition to a plantation-based timber industry
 - o Phase out coal and gas burning, which is making the climate crisis worse and driving devastating extreme events like heat waves, fires and floods
 - o Stop destructive and unnecessary development like the Western Highway Duplication and the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal which continue to bit-by-bit erode the health of Victoria's environment for corporate profits.
 - o Change the laws that allow wildlife to be killed, and grasslands and other habitat to be cleared, with little to no ramifications.

I reiterate that protecting our environment strengthens our community, our society and our economy. What are humans without the natural world? We must work hard to protect our threatened habitats and species before it is too late for them and for us.

(1) McGregor BA and McGregor AM, "Communities caring for land and nature in Victoria" *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* (2020), 23, 153-171; and "Activism on the Merri Creek", *Friends of Merri Creek*, <https://friendsofmerricreek.org.au/activism-history/>

(2) "About", *Friends of Merri Creek*, <https://friendsofmerricreek.org.au/about/>

(3) "News – Muddy Merri Troubles Update", *Friends of Merri Creek*, <https://friendsofmerricreek.org.au/muddy-merri-troubles-update/>

(4) "Melbourne councils join forces to fight North East Link", *The Age*, June 15, 2019, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/melbourne-councils-join-forces-to-fight-north-east-link-20190615-p51y28.html>

(5) Victorian State of the Environment Report 2018, <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-environment-2018>

(6) "Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands", Victorian Auditor-General's Office, <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/protecting-critically-endangered-grasslands>

(7) "These historic grasslands are becoming a weed-choked waste. It could be one of the world's greatest parks", *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/these-historic-grasslands-are-becoming-a-weed-choked-waste-it-could-be-one-of-the-worlds-great-parks-144208>