

## **Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the decline of Victoria's ecosystems and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species**

I provide this submission, as a very concerned citizen. Nature and healthy ecosystems are essential for life and we have a responsibility to maintain the extraordinary biodiversity that we have and to not allow any further species extinctions.

I grew up on a farm in the north of Victoria in a nature loving family. We appreciated bush walks and my Mum, who is a botanical painter, could identify so many plants. Holidays always included sketches and research about Victoria's wonderful landscapes that we would encounter. Whether beach holidays, mountain walks at the Grampians or Cathedral ranges, the mighty mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands and East Gippsland, we felt the diversity of species added so much to the wonder of life. Intricate symbiotic relationships between species were magical and humans through scientific understanding are still uncovering knowledge that pertains to an ancient wisdom. I feel reverence for the First People of this place we are so lucky to now inhabit. They understood and managed this land with deep respect and knowing how interconnected they were. So many injustices need to be made right now.

Sadly, in my life I've experienced the decline in these landscapes, through often avoidable over-development, logging, mismanagement of water resources - through ignorance, greed and even deliberate government policy.

After the catastrophic bushfires of summer 2019/20 I feel despair, like so many others. **Over 3 billion animals died**, our iconic wildlife. These were not ordinary fires. 1.4 million hectares burnt in Victoria alone. I thought this would be a line in the sand where governments would be compelled and commended to now take significant action to stop climate change and protect vast stores of carbon, such as our state native forests and protect the unique places in nature that we have left. Now, as we manage the covid-19 crisis, we have a chance to build back better, with new focus, giving ourselves the best chance to mitigate future climate change impacts.

To address the terms of reference:

**(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;**

Australia is the extinction capital of the world, as evidenced by the *UN Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report (2019)*. Victoria's biodiversity and ecosystems are in alarming decline. Loss of habitat is a significant cause of this. We have over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems that are under threat in Victoria.

Central Highlands forests are the most carbon dense in the world, with towering mountain ash trees, the tallest flowering trees found anywhere on the planet. They are critically endangered (IUCN), as are two species that rely on them: the Leadbeater's Possum and Greater Glider. Unbelievably these forests are enduring industrial clear fell logging by the government's own agency Vicforests. Eighty per cent of what's logged in Victoria's native forests is woodchipped for paper production.

The impact on community of these forest ecosystem collapses would be dire. If these forests are protected and healthy, thousands of species – wildlife, plants, insects, fungi can remain viable. If they continue to be logged and the ecosystems collapse:

- Melbourne's water supply (volume and quality) will be dramatically reduced
- Terrible cultural loss for First Peoples. Loss of trust in the Treaties process, as government fails listen or acknowledge that permission from aboriginal people for forest destruction was never given.
- Lost economic opportunities for nature-based tourism, jobs, community benefits.

- Lost carbon storage capacity, worsening climate change effects.
- Threatened species will be lost forever and with each of these gone, we would be facing a lesser, more difficult world and ultimately human demise.
- Communities put at risk of severe bushfires, as scientific evidence shows logging contributes to fire risk.
- Air quality worsening.

Being in a climate emergency, ecosystem collapse takes us to such a dangerous place, with tipping points. It takes us to hotter, drier conditions, more regular catastrophic bushfires that we are powerless to control, droughts, food shortages, global refugee crises, likely wars, more pandemics... we should avoid this at all costs!

**(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;**

The legislative framework is inadequate. Victoria's state forests are essentially unprotected, because the current Regional Forest Agreement exempts VicForests from Federal environmental laws. Recent Federal court decisions challenge these exemptions from national protection, notably the recent case Friends of Leadbeater's Possum vs Vicforests. Judge Mortimer found that VicForests failed to comply with the Victorian Code of Practice and now must comply with national environmental laws (for the disputed logging coupes).

The Office of the Environmental Regulator has proven to be ineffective, allowing VicForests to log state forests illegally. This is the finding of three different High Court Judges in independent court cases decided in 2020.

**(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;**

DELWP don't seem to create Action Plans when species are determined to be Vulnerable or Critically Endangered. Are the resources inadequate or the will to protect the species absent? It takes months or even years for a simple Action Plan to be drawn up. As a member of the public I don't think this is good enough, especially from a Department that's purpose is supposed to be in considering and acting for our Environment.

In regards to air quality the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) appears to be concerned with *measuring* air quality but not in *preventing* damaging events eg. Industrial scale incinerators or preventing pollution from industrial scale post logging burns, which adversely affect local communities.

Victoria has a great range of national and state parks, that protect ecosystems, from the inland rivers and semi arid zones to the highest peaks. However, this current government falls far behind many previous governments in creating new national parks. There are some important (1) gaps of new protections that should be declared.

Currently, national parks and reserves only receive less than 0.5% of state government expenditure. In the face of a growing global, and local, extinction crisis we need to significantly increase investment in nature.

Park managers need significantly more funding for core frontline capacity to deal with the many pressures placed on parks, particularly for pest plant and animal control. We also need a large investment in weed and invasive species eradication. This could create many jobs.

**(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;**

We can't stop extinction unless we stop the destructive activities that are driving it.  
We need to:

**Bring forward the plan to end native forest logging and immediately start the transition** to a pulp and timber industry which is not reliant on native forests. Two immediate priorities are protection of unburnt Greater Glider habitat, and a continued moratorium on logging in East Gippsland. No amount of planting can replace carbon lost in logging the world's most carbon dense terrestrial forest for paper. There is already \$120 million allocated under the timber industry transition plan and a previous amount of \$110 million allocated in the 2017/18 budget to establish new plantations. **These projects should be fast tracked.** This will create employment in both seedling establishment, land preparation and tree planting. This would be fairer for workers and contractors in the logging industry, as they have investments in equipment and it's getting harder to make money, as there is not enough timber (due to fires and mismanagement of industry). They are taking younger trees in more difficult terrain and closer to towns. It is causing so much conflict and division and all involved would be better off to allow those transition funds to be used earlier for a faster exit. Many of these contractors are highly skilled and could adapt their work to fire fighting and fire mitigating (facilitated by government/VicCarbon).

Investments should be made in affected regional areas for **nature based tourism infrastructure** and establishing exciting sustainable industries. The government has created these economic opportunities in the LaTrobe Valley and a similar success story could be the new narrative for a transition out of native forest logging. **It's about protecting biodiversity and ecosystems as well as being agile and creating new, positive economic opportunities.**

**VicForests should become VicCarbon** and completely refocus their activities, in line with the Transition.

The government should **rule out salvage logging of burnt areas** because of the negative ecological impacts of such activity.

The state government must urgently implement and properly **resource Action Statements** (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2,000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements.

It should **stop destructive and unnecessary developments** like the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal, the Kalbar mineral sands project in East Gippsland.

**Emission Reduction Targets (ERTs)** - the government needs a plan to phase out our reliance on burning coal, oil and gas, which is making the climate crisis worse and driving extreme events like heat waves, extended fire seasons and flooding. Victorian government must set science-based ERTs for the years 2025 and 2030 which allow Victoria to play a role in the global efforts to keep global temperature rise under 1.5oC.

**Stop unsustainable hunting of native wildlife** – for instance, native duck shooting or over-fishing.

**(e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria; and**

The previously mentioned VicCarbon idea, could facilitate rural and regional people, including Aboriginal people, to create a climate safe future with long-term rural and regional jobs in agroforestry, Park maintenance and revegetation, tourism (food, wine, cycling, bushwalks) and ecological research.

The Treaty process I hope will succeed in addressing wrongs and redefining relationships between the State, Aboriginal Victorians and non-Aboriginal Victorians. The current culture of not listening, not respecting or acting in a way that demonstrates those things, is so damaging and perpetuating the wrongs of colonisation. Continuing to bulldoze forests, destroying the Djap Warrung (birthing) trees – must stop, or renders the Treaty meaningless. **Actions speak louder than words.**

### **(1) Gaps in current protection**

**Western VIC:** In particular, forest and woodlands on public land in the west of the state (roughly west of the Hume Highway) are fragmented remnants of bush, often surrounded by a sea of cleared farmland. These are important patches of bushland threatened by logging, mining and poor management.

Around 40% of Victoria's native land-based mammals, bird and amphibians are largely restricted to fragmented landscapes in the west and north of the state. A further 45% rely on them as a major part of their distribution in Victoria.

There are 20 state forests in the central west of the state, including the Wombat (near Daylesford), Wellsford (near Bendigo), Mt Cole (west of Ballarat) and Pyrenees that need of better protection and management.

**Inland Rivers:** In November 2009, the Victorian Parliament gave the green light for the creation of almost 100,000 hectares of new river red gum national parks from Lake Hume to the South Australian border.

The missing link is the Murray River Park. Dotted between the Barmah, Gunbower, Lower Goulburn River and Warby Range-Ovens River is a series of small reserves collectively known as the Murray River Park.

It is not a formal park, and cattle are still licensed to graze, and damage sensitive wetlands and pollute the river.

These small reserves were meant to form a link between larger protected areas that stretch from near the South Australian border across to the Hattah-Kulkyne, Gunbower, Barmah and Warby Range-Ovens River national parks.

The government should declare the Murray River Park.

### ***The Western Grassland Reserve:***

Native grasslands on the western fringe of Melbourne are one of Australia's most endangered ecosystems.

The state government has made a commitment to acquire land for a 15,000 hectare Western Grassland Reserve (WGR) between Little River and Melton by 2020, using fees paid by

developers when destroying areas of grassland within the urban growth boundary. However, the government has only delivered about 10% of this land into reserves.

The WGR, and other valuable grassland remnants in Melbourne's west, are deteriorating due to lack of management of weed invasion, overgrazing and other processes.

The government needs to ensure immediate conservation management, and prioritised public acquisition, of the areas promised protection by 2020 (WGR and urban growth zone) with transparency and accountability in their acquisition and management.