

Dear Members of The Standing Committee on Environment and Planning,

My name is Katharine Balson and I am a Mother and Teacher in [REDACTED] Melbourne.

All my life I have spent in Nature and so has my family, and, whenever possible, my students.

I am at my happiest and at peace when I am in a forest or in a natural space, where I immerse myself observing the wonders of nature all around me.

To be in a Victorian rainforest, say around Warburton, where I smell the damp fresh earth, listen to the calls of lyrebirds and whipbirds intermingled with kookaburras laughing whilst sitting quietly by a gurgling stream, is my idea of 'heaven'. The lush tree ferns tower above me and the Mountain Ash reach their magnificent limbs to the sky....My family has spent countless hours in the bush, bird spotting, bush walking, paddling in streams, finding colorful fungi amongst the leaf litter and breathing in the fresh crisp air. This is our happy space.

As a teacher, the joy my students find, in bushwalking, planting, insect identification, spotting birds and animals... is all so precious to their mental, emotional and cognitive development. To feel that connection to the earth and to nature, is vital for their mental health.

Sadly, this wonder and this joy, is being eroded, as we see the decline in biodiversity, the decline in the health of our rivers and our forests, see logging trucks moving in to precious old growth forests around Warburton. We know Climate Change here and is starting to wreak havoc around the world. Our forests, particularly our cool temperate forests, store millions of tonnes of carbon: we need them standing! And there is the huge reduction in the number of insects, (our pollinators and our little recyclers)..This rapid decline in our ecosystems is soul destroying for the youth of today, for my family and for me. And the health and well-being of all Victorians is at risk if we keep heading this way.

We need to address many things to reverse this rapid decline, which is backed by Science as well as people like me and our observations of the changes going on around us.

Some suggestions I have:

1. Establish The Great Forest National Park: a hot spot for biodiversity, for protecting endangered species, for protecting our valuable water supply and a super valuable region for tourism.
2. Stop logging our native forests immediately. We have enough plantation timber to work with (and redirect people into that industry) and let wildlife prosper in the forests we have left.
3. Limit development. Make sure nature and wildlife has priority. Set limits on land clearing.
4. Strictly regulate the use of pesticides and herbicides, particularly in agriculture, so that insects can flourish (,as they are the basis of the food chain.)

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.
Katharine Balson