

## Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Maria Miranda



Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

It is difficult to say in words how important the natural environment is to all of us. During the COVID-19 pandemic the restored Merri Creek parklands were inundated with people walking and enjoying the beautiful Merri creek, cloaked in trees and full of birds and wildlife. I've seen pictures of the Merri Creek from 1987 -- before its restoration by dedicated volunteers. It was a wasteland, devoid of any life -- grey and polluted. Today it is a place the people of Darebin love and hold dearly. This place is an example of government listening to the people who actually live here. Apparently there had been plans to destroy a huge swathe through these northern suburbs and build a freeway. Today the people of Darebin feel enormous relief their suburb was not dissected by a freeway, but instead gifted with this beautiful parkland.

I think this was a very good decision by the government of the day and shows how decisions can be made that change everything. Political decisions can be made to stop destructive practices and actually bring great joy and love back into places that have been used and abused. That is why I am writing this submission today. I want to convey to the Commission how important it is that we listen to the science about biodiversity loss and change our behaviour and we listen to Indigenous custodians of the land and implement strong laws that will protect the natural environment and in particular protect biodiversity. It is time to stop the decline in Victoria's biodiversity and environment.

Sometimes we can be fooled into thinking all is right with the birdlife and animal life around us. For instance, there seems to be lots of birds around in my neighbourhood. However, if you look closely as I have done recently as I walk around the neighbourhood, much of the birdlife is one or two species. The Common Minor bird flies around in great packs and swoops and fights off other birds. It is very aggressive and very territorial. It makes a lot of noise and sounds like there's lots of birds. To the innocent eye it may seem like there's lots of birds, but in fact, they are all the one species. Meanwhile, ironically, Victoria's bird emblem the Helmeted Honeyeater is on the critically endangered list. There are estimated to be only 200 birds left in the world, and their habitat in Victoria has shrunk to a tiny piece of nature reserve called Yellingbo Reserve.

It's quite a sobering thought that most of Australia's wildlife, especially its wonderful endemic birds are unique to Australia. **That means they occur nowhere else in the world!** We are the custodians of this amazing country with this beautiful wildlife that Indigenous people cared and looked after for tens of thousands of years, yet within my lifetime we have

created such loss, it's a shocking realisation. Victoria has some of its own unique species and plants. I'm thinking of the beautiful Mount Cole Grevillea, a flowering plant found only in a small pocket of forest in Central Victoria, currently tagged for logging. To any sane person reading this, it would seem madness to deliberately endanger such a rare plant to match a logging quota for toilet paper! It's so appalling. If this were a scifi movie we would be the monstrous aliens invading from out of space and set on destruction and pillage. Laying waste to the land.

In 2018 I visited the wetlands near Kerang in Northern Victoria. They are Ramsar wetlands, which should mean they are entitled to some protection. However, during the duck shooting season usually beginning in March and lasting 3 months, Australian water birds are shot out of the sky as soon as they appear. The year I was there I was shocked at the *lack* of birds. I grew up across the border in NSW and have vivid memories of large flocks of birds filling the skies. In 2018 I saw no such flocks. I felt so sad, not only at the senseless shooting and maiming and killing, but at the total absence of the birdlife I remember. Since then I've read that Australian waterbirds, according to Professor Kingsford of NSW University, have declined by up to 70% even 90% since he began his studies in 1982. This should give us pause to think and weep.

In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of Victoria's environment. The findings were released in 2019 and are alarming to say the least. The health of Victoria's environment is considered 'good' in just 11% of areas, and is going backwards in 30% of areas. We cannot afford to let this trend continue. Instead, we need to take urgent action to restore our environment to good health.

I understand that the Victorian Government was required to respond to the State of Environment Report with a plan of action within 12 months, and I'm very dismayed that this hasn't happened. While I know COVID-19 is taking a lot of the Government's attention, most of the 12 month period the Government had to respond to this report was *prior* to the COVID emergency. COVID cannot be used as a cynical excuse.

#### MAJOR CAUSES OF DECLINE IN VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT

Decline in Victoria's ecosystems and wildlife is driven by some key threats. I am not an expert and I expect the committee will be provided with all the facts and details from the experts. Here are some key threats and solutions that I would like to see this committee consider and address.

**Climate change** Burning coal, oil and gas in the last two centuries has warmed the global climate by 1 degree celsius. Why are we still doing this when we know now its effects on our environment and the warming of the planet?

**Solution 1:** Victoria must urgently stop burning fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) for energy asap and should reduce other sources of greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. from transport and agriculture) to limit global warming and its impacts.

We should all be driving electric cars! I, like many Australians would love to buy an electric car - and have tried – but the problems have been insurmountable. The cost of the cars are ridiculous. However the biggest problem is the lack of infrastructure to recharge cars across Victoria. It's ridiculous that we in Victoria cannot drive across Victoria with an electric car! Norway plans to ban petrol cars by 2025! It can be done. And NSW and WA are rolling out the infrastructure now.

All government vehicles should be electric. This would rid us of dirty, smelly, noisy polluting buses. This is a very easy fix and would help with both air pollution and noise as well as ceasing the use of imported oil and petrol. A big saving for us.

Gas should not be supported or even considered as a transition fuel. It is a fossil fuel pure and simple. The Western Port Bay gas pipeline project, currently planned, should be axed immediately as a project that would cause untold destruction of the precious wetlands as well as destroy the complex and biodiverse hotspot of the Bay's marine life.

**Land clearing and deforestation** - Logging and clearing of native vegetation in Victoria is hugely destructive and logging in particular is totally unnecessary. It was estimated that VicForest makes as little as \$22k profit on some forest clearing. This is obscene.

Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with around two thirds of the state cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants. In Victoria, over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are under threat.

VicForest does not have a mandate from the people of Victoria. In every poll conducted on logging Victorians have voted to see an end to logging. Yet it continues. So many Victorians were distressed when the Premier announced that logging would continue until 2030. This is an old trick to promise to do something...in the future. Many of us are old enough to understand this trick. It is treachery on the part of government. We, the Victorian people want logging to stop immediately. That means now. It is unfathomable that logging is allowed in our old growth forests. I am scared that younger generations will never see these old forests and experience their magic: once you have visited an old growth forest you are never the same again. I urge the Committee to set aside time to visit these old growth forests in East Gippsland before making any decisions. The Goonerah Environment Group would be happy to give you a tour and you can see for yourself. I can assure you once you've been into these forests you won't need me to tell you that they need to be saved and treasured. It will change your life.

Victoria has more than 70 forest dependent threatened species, yet native forest logging is set to continue until 2030 in Victoria. This is despite a recent federal court case that found much logging in Victoria is in breach of national environmental laws and is directly driving animal extinction.

**Solution 2:** Victoria should immediately transition out of native forest logging, with financial support for workers and the industry. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimates this would save the Victorian budget \$190 million.!

**Invasive species** - Introduced plants and animals have a profound negative impact on Victoria's environment. Introduced animals like deer cause damage to our alpine landscapes and native vegetation. They also outcompete native wildlife. Deer are just one example. Other examples of damaging invasive animals include foxes, rabbits, cats, pigs and horses. Invasive weeds are also very prevalent in Victoria. They clog up streams and rivers, smother native plants and don't provide the food and habitat that native wildlife need.

**Solution 3:** Victoria needs a comprehensive and fully funded program to remove introduced plants and humanely remove feral animals and we need a massive replanting program to restore habitat across the state. This would also be a great way to employ many out-of-work Victorians as we rebuild our economy following COVID-19. It could also be a way to employ former loggers.

## SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT AND RESTORE VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT

Here's some more solutions for the committee to investigate that would protect and restore our landscapes and threatened species.

### **A Save our Species program for Victoria**

New South Wales has a detailed Save Our Species program, with a dedicated \$100 million in funding. This is what we need here in Victoria.

**Solution 4:** A save our species fund for Victoria with substantial new government funding (minimum \$100 million) to restore threatened species in Victoria, as well as public information outlining what public funding is spent on threatened species conservation and how it is being spent.

### **Deliver promised grassland reserves**

Before colonisation, grasslands and woodlands covered over a third of Victoria, yet less than 5% of these areas remain!

**Solution 5:** Victorian Government must purchase the required area of grassland and woodland reserves outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment plan by December 2021 and fully restore these within the next two years.

### **Funding for private land conservation**

**Solution 6:** Establish a Victorian Government funded \$50 million "revolving fund" to purchase, restore and then resell private land for conservation. The fund is "revolving" because some of the money is put back in once the land is restored and sold.

### **Mandatory nature laws**

**Solution 7:** Reform Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act so that where private or government activities would damage our ecosystems and threatened species, the Environment Minister must **by law** step in to prevent or limit the activity. This would make it clear to the Minister what the priorities of the job are: looking after our environment for the benefit of all Victorians and not just the profits of a few.

## CONCLUSION

I look forward to seeing strong action to protect and restore Victoria's environment as a result of the work of this committee.

Thank-you. I am happy for my submission to be made public.