

30 August 2020

**To:** Standing Committee on Environment and Planning  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

**From:** Ms Kerry baker

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**Re:** Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

I first visited Melbourne in 1974, and moved to Victoria early the following year. What I particularly loved about Melbourne then was the greenery, the varieties of birds and animals which were a healthy part of life. Victoria then was called the Garden State, it was such a vibrant environment. When my mother visited me she was amazed at the abundant trees and plants, she remarked that even houses with a small courtyard had plants and that Victoria really was The Garden State. I recall taking a friend who was visiting from NSW up to the top of Mt Macedon just after a rain, and getting out of the car greeted by the beautiful smell of eucalyptus as the trees had released their fragrance in the rain. It was a joyful experience, one I will always treasure.

I saw more varieties of native birds around then. This past decade it has been sad to see how many have been in decline, and some species like the Musk Lorikeet I no longer see. Gardens are disappearing too, lovely homes demolished to build multi story apartments that block out the sun and make it difficult to grow plants. And green areas sold for 'development'.

Our seasons have also dramatically changed. In 1975 we had 4 distinct seasons and could plan with reasonable assurance our holidays and special occasions. In winter there would be a light crunch underfoot as we trod on the thin ice that covered the lawn. Autumns were wonderful, warm days and cool nights and the wonderful changes to the colours of leaves, it was my favourite season. I have not seen that in years, and the weather has become much less certain and easy to plan for.

I remember in the early 1990's for the first time driving through the Otways, and being so enchanted by the forest there. It was the most beautiful place I think I had ever seen. Several years later I had the chance to go back there, and was so shocked when I was driving along trying to find the forest, and realised that the barren place I had just driven through had been that forest.

Earlier this year, just after the fires, I was driving up towards Avoca. For most of the way until the turn off to Learmonth is fairly treeless open grassed fields or built up areas where the smoke haze hung in the atmosphere making breathing difficult, even with my car windows closed. I was sad for the people living there having to put up with that. As soon as I reached Lexton it was totally different, the air was clean and sweet. The difference was there are a great many trees there.

These experiences make me sad for future generations who will not be able to know the beauty of our forests and wildlife as I have enjoyed. It reminds me of that scene in Soylent Green when they show people taking voluntary suicide film of what Earth once was like. We are no longer The Garden State.

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Australia is one of the countries that will be hit hardest by climate change, we know this. And we are not going to be able to limit global warming to 2% if we continue as we are. Healthy ecosystems are our best defence. I have been fortunate to have the experiences in nature described above, and more. The next generation will not, and that is a tragedy.

We know that trees give us healthy water tables, provide us with oxygen and clean our air. And yet we continue to see our native forests only value as timber to be cut down. Some years ago I read an article by a group of environmental economists about the value of trees. I'm unable to recall exactly the figures, but they calculated that if humankind had to produce the oxygen that we obtained for free from trees, that it would cost something like four times the total GDP of all 1st world economies. We also see this with our water, having to look at desalination plants for future needs where once our water tables were healthy. And these costs are borne by Victorians.

We also know from the fires at the start of 2020 that we create a climate that affects the whole planet. The smoke from our fires travelled to countries far away, it was a horrible event. Continuing to cut down trees only makes this worse because of the global warming effect. It is what is termed a 'wicked problem.' We must stop cutting down our forests if we are to stop global warming, and we must manage our fire seasons. Ordinary citizens pay for this with their lives, with their property and their livelihoods. We know that the Insurance Industry is now refusing to cover people and business in high risk areas, and this will only get worse if we don't turn it around.

We can also see the cost to the health budget, with higher levels of respiratory illnesses every time we have dust storms and fires. Vegetation holds the soils stable, and offers shelter. I am finding that I develop hayfever with the Spring blustery winds now, something that never previously bothered me. When the North Wind begins, it brings much more dust and pollen than it used to. And I have heard many people make the same comment, that they are getting sicker at this time than before.

We know that there is an increasing problem with mental health in our society. To me being able to visit nature reserves or walk into a forest is a hugely healing experience. Being surrounded by the trees, hearing the birds, being able to see all the small creatures that live in the forest, is a magical and uplifting experience. Children know this, they have infinite curiosity and love of nature. We know that our beautiful animals are unable to survive in trees less than around 70+ years old. To suggest that we can simply plant trees to replenish a forest is a nonsense, ecosystems just don't work like that. I sat through three days of the recent Federal Court case over Vicforests and logging. I was shocked to learn that Vicforests totally rejected logging as one of the causal factors of driving species towards extinction that was specifically noted in a scientific paper. If government departments ignore science, who will look after the interests of those affected by these issues?

My very strong suggestion to this Committee is to recognise the much greater value in trees, and our other environments such as the seaside, as living entities that have far greater value alive than dead. They give us oxygen for free. They provide us with healthy water. They give us joy. They heal us. They bring people together. They save governments and citizens money and give us a future.

Please place science above money and choose conservation. There is much we can do to make Victoria a better place. Create incentives for Victorians to plant trees and other flora. Strengthen planning laws to require green spaces. Protect wildlife corridors to protect them and keep them safe off the roads.

I am happy to meet with the Committee to discuss any aspects of this submission.

Kerry Baker