

Ecosystem decline submission

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Director, Naturelinks Landscape Management Pty Ltd

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria. We are in a desperate situation both locally and on a planetary level with an accelerating rate of biodiversity decline. Biodiversity has been declining since white settlement.

While we are faced with a situation where the Liberal National coalition do not have policies around protecting biodiversity, the Labour party doesn't need to raise the bar very high to do better. According to the Victorian [State of the Environment 2018 Report](#), most biodiversity indicators are poor and trending downwards. If the government thinks having the public point out the current State deficiencies will help, then please don't generate more despair and depression by sitting on your hands in response to this inquiry. Again, thank you for the opportunity.

I am the co-owner of a biodiversity management business with over 70 staff. We have been around for over 20 years and work in the greater Melbourne region as well as down the Great Ocean Road for Local Government, State Government agencies and mining companies. I am also the chair of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Association of Bushland Regenerators (AABR) and a member of numerous organisations which aim to protect and engender education about and enjoyment of the natural environment. Note that this submission is not submitted on behalf of either of those organisations. I have been in the field of ecological management for around 50 years, enjoy the natural environment and hold deep respect for our first nations people, their knowledge and values. Some comments in response to the terms of reference are provided below:

- 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.

I cannot provide information on the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity, however there are government commissioned reports which measure this. Perhaps the rate of decline would be a more informative measurement than the extent of decline. Obviously, last summer's bushfires have had an enormous additional impact on this since the last report. Climate change, which includes the impact of more severe droughts, high temperatures and more intense bushfires will have a huge additional impact to that from the lack of government support and funding which currently exists.

I believe the impact of biodiversity decline on people and first peoples is immeasurable, especially accounting for future generations. The natural world is an integral part of first people's culture, hence they are severely impacted by biodiversity decline. Non indigenous people also have a primal psychological need for biodiversity as well as a need for ecosystem services provided by biodiversity.

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

Two current examples provide evidence of the inadequacy of the current legislative framework. Firstly, the state of the proposed Western Grasslands Reserve – as identified by the recent Auditor General's report. Secondly, the current state of affairs where voluntary community groups are forced to use the courts to protect threatened species and biodiversity loss against the Government Forestry Corporation, VicForests. Even suppliers like Bunnings and Officeworks are having to force the governments arm to curb the actions of this unaccountable body in the vacuum left by inadequate legislation.

A third example is the recent Auditor General's report on Rehabilitating Mines, which found the relevant department is not regulating operators compliance with their rehabilitation requirements. So while there may be adequate legislation, another problem is that it isn't being implemented – as with the federal EPBC act.

- c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems.

Current government programs and funding are entirely inadequate. The protection of biodiversity on public is a responsibility which sits almost entirely with government. Only increased funding will improve the current decline. The VNPA has suggested a figure be set which is at least 1% of the state budget. As a biodiversity manager and industry representative I am witness to the inadequacy of funding through tenders and grant funding that is being offered in the way of government support. One example in relation to first nations people that I am aware of is the Wurdi Youang proposed indigenous protected area. I have visited this site and it is run on a shoestring budget with little state support, despite being an area of world significance.

Failure to include the Conservation and Land Management Certificate III in the TAFE Free Skills list has led to the provision of the course being entirely inadequate and extreme difficulty for the biodiversity management industry to engage in the traineeship program. Many potential students have chosen Horticulture or Nursery streams as these are on the free list, consequently the CLM Cert III is being offered by only a few of the RTO's in the greater Melbourne region.

- 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.

One area for improvement I suggest you investigate is the division of responsibilities between Parks Victoria and DELWP. Parks Vic was set up by the Kennett Government, not for the purposes of better biodiversity outcomes. I believe the division of responsibilities is not in the best interest of biodiversity protection.

Adoption of the Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia's *National standards for the practice of ecological restoration in Australia* in the biodiversity restoration would improve the quality of biodiversity management. The State Government has a leadership role to play here.

Better funding of DELWP would enable them to provide a leadership role – there is a vacuum in leadership at the moment.

I am not an expert in the field of legislation however, as a subscriber to the newsletters of the VNPA and Environmental Justice Australia, I recommend you to any suggestions they have.

- e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria.
 - Increase funding for invasive species control – Victoria is going backwards in this area.

- Stop detrimental native forest logging, including salvage logging. Implement a curb to the authority of Vicforests.
- Provide more assistance to landholders with biodiversity assets on private land.
- Establish more national parks and provide them with more funding.
- Provide adequate funding for Action Statements for all threatened species. These have been shown to work with adequate funding and support.
- What about a 2030 community forum on biodiversity?
- Come up with a more effective ecological burning plan in consultation with first nations experts.
- Landcare and volunteer groups are doing a great job in filling the gap left by inadequate funding in ecosystem decline but they need many times the support they are getting from works funded by the State.
- Indigenous nurseries provide a great way to focus community efforts, and can expand, as with the [Euroa Arboretum](#), into areas such as seed production areas, seed banks, community involvement, first nations partnerships, restoration knowledge centres, restoration projects and more. However, having been involved in indigenous nurseries for over 35 years, I know they need government support.
- Support for the Australian Association of Bushland Regenerators would be a great way to assist those involved in the practice of biodiversity restoration. Please contact me if you wish to know more.
- Support for environmental consultants would similarly assist in arresting biodiversity decline.
- As stated above, adoption of the Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia's [National standards for the practice of ecological restoration in Australia](#) in the biodiversity restoration would improve the quality of biodiversity management. These have been adopted by the worldwide Society for Ecological Restoration.
- Working in collaboration with organisations like the VNPA would be a step forward, these organisations are full of passionate members and workers who can assist the government in the overwhelmingly urgent task ahead of us.
- Speeding up climate change initiatives would obviously help arrest decline in the long term.
- Ask first nation people what they think about what Vicforests are doing. Engage with them on how they could assist in providing alternative employment in proposals like a new Great Forests Park. Ask them how you could assist with restoring the [Wurdi Youang](#) and other cultural areas through employment initiatives.
- Put the Conservation and Land Management Certificate III on the Free Skills List. Currently there are only two RTO's in the greater Melbourne region offering a traineeship in this biodiversity practitioners' course. This provides an indication of the dire current state of biodiversity training.
- Improving the delivery and assessment of this course would also help. Many volunteers as well as professional practitioners would benefit from improvements to this course.
- One initiative AABR is working on is the development of shared on line training resources which can be used by business, RTO's and volunteer groups. The current Kennett model of TAFE's ensures each RTO has to develop their own resources in competition with other providers. I understand other industries have developed shared training resources. This could also be an initiative done in collaboration with other states.
- Provision of species lists for Victorian EVC's would be a great help. This would require funding.
- Establish an independent conservation regulator with a clear legislative foundation and all the legal powers needed to ensure Victoria's conservation laws are complied with.
- Reject the Morrison governments proposal to delegate responsibilities of the EPBC act to the States.

Thank you for considering my submission and please don't hesitate to contact me with any queries.

