



# Friends of the Glenfern Green Wedge Inc.

Reg. No. A0057443E

**PO Box 7114  
Upper Ferntree Gully  
Vic 3156**

## **SUBMISISON TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA**

The Friends of the Glenfern Green Wedge (FGGW) is an environmental group active in Knox and the neighbouring areas of the Dandenong Ranges and Lysterfield Valley. Knox is a prime example of the situation in Melbourne's outer suburbs regarding threats to flora and fauna, and our group is typical of the work done by many community groups to address this decline in ecosystems.

FGGW has worked on Ferny Creek and the Gilmour Park retarding Basin in Upper Ferntree Gully for approximately 10 years. We work in collaboration with Knox Council, Melbourne Water, and other friends' groups (e.g. the Knox Environment Society) in propagating local plants and rehabilitating local sites, in particular our local reserve on Ferny Creek in Upper Ferntree Gully. This reserve was 'won' by the efforts of the community who fought two subdivision applications through VCAT over a period of approximately 5 years. Since then, we have continued to care for the site through revegetation works, weeding and monitoring of flora and fauna, including regular bird surveys. Like many locally-based, volunteer friends' groups, we donate countless hours to political lobbying and making submissions in addition to our regular work in land care/revegetation, plant propagation, community education, and 'citizen science' projects including monitoring of birds, frogs, marsupials, and other flora and fauna through apps such as the Melbourne Water Frog Census.

The clearest indication of ecosystem decline in Knox is found in the *Sites of Biological Significance* surveys conducted by Dr Graeme Lorimer and commissioned by Knox Council in 2010. This document indicates that that there is less than 3% remnant vegetation remaining in Knox. Of Knox's local plant species, 39% are locally critically endangered, 23% Endangered, 17% Vulnerable, and 6% Locally extinct.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Knox has many other plants and animals recorded on state and federal threatened-species lists. For example, the State-Wide Integrated Flora and Fauna Teams (SWIFFT) website documents 37 species of threatened birds, 5 species of threatened mammals and 2 species of threatened fish in Knox.

FGGW also commissioned a report by Birdlife Australia in 2011, which looked specifically at bird species centring on Ferny Creek. The report, appended to this submission, details 200 birds including 11 endangered, 16 vulnerable, 4 critically endangered, and 4 near threatened bird species. Also, the report identifies 12 birds on Australian Government's bi-lateral agreements with Japan (JAMBA) and China (CAMBA). FGGW has been conducting regular monthly bird surveys on the Ferny Creek Reserve since December 2015 (under the mentorship of Birdlife Australia) and our surveys are entered into the Birdata Atlas. We have personally sighted many of these rare species, including the JAMBA- and CAMBA-listed cattle egret and Latham's snipe.

Our group has come to understand through practical, hands-on experience how biodiversity and 'connectivity' works. Our particular section of Ferny Creek is part of an important wildlife corridor formed by Jells Park, Churchill National Park, Lysterfield Park, and the Dandenong Ranges and encompasses Ferny

---

<sup>1</sup>Graeme Lorimer, *Sites of Biological Significance in Knox*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (June 2010). Commissioned by Knox City Council.

Creek, Monbulk Creek, Dandenong Creek, and Corhanwarrabul Creek. Even a small loss in the chain of connectivity is a loss to the entire corridor and can have severe consequences. This is demonstrated, for example, in Ferny Creek, between the Gilmour Park Retarding Basin and Water Avenue, where the creek was diverted into pipes, thereby disconnecting it from the main creek and interrupting its flow, so that fish and platypus that once existed here were cut off, isolated and could not move along the creek corridor. As a result, many species in this section of the creek including dwarf galaxia fish and the iconic platypus became extinct in this area.

In our work as a volunteer group, FGGW has also had the pleasure of experiencing first-hand, the gradual return of some species to the area after rehabilitation works (re-plantings with locally-sourced indigenous plants) was undertaken. This is evidenced in the increasing numbers of species in our bird counts over almost 5 years and coinciding with the new plantings along the creek. This regeneration was made possible by excluding cattle from the creek and by the land being returned to public (council) ownership. Prior to this, the private landowners neglected the creek area allowing it to become severely eroded and weed infested. They also repeatedly denied Melbourne Water access to the site, so that MW was unable to attend to the creek, which also caused major flooding events for people living downstream on the north side of the creek.

This points to an underlying problem that must be dealt with across the state and the entire country: Ideally, all waterways (and beaches) should be in the public rather than private ownership. We should aim for a gradual return of land along waterways to ownership by water authorities, councils, or parks' authorities. In the meantime, anyone privileged enough to own land along waterways or a beach front should be subject to strict conditions of care and maintenance of mandatory conservation zones. In our experience, Melbourne Water is very happy to assist owners in this regard, so that care for creeks does not need to be an onerous task for private landowners. Melbourne Water can assist with weed removal and maintenance, purchasing plants, paying contractors to remove weeds, water pumps for cattle, and fencing. Local friends' groups are often very happy to lend a hand as well – including on private land.

Private land has a huge role to play in the survival of threatened species, especially along waterways and other habitat corridors, because these corridors are essential to allow a variety of species to move through the landscape for food and nesting. This has been recognised by the State Government as part of the Yarra-River Planning-Panel hearings and the subsequent media release announcing that the Government would implement a mandatory a 30 metre-set back buffer for over 200 km of the river. This model should be initiated across every waterway in the state, where possible. We congratulate the State Government for this courageous move of mandating a buffer along the Yarra River.

Similar to the situation that led to the creation of the reserve along Ferny Creek in Upper Ferntree Gully (via VCAT), FGGW has also worked hard to protect and conserve Monbulk Creek where it flows out of Birdsland Reserve through the idyllic, National-Trust listed Lysterfield Valley. This site (over 200 hectares of farming land) has also been subject to applications for subdivision and through a long drawn-out process of making submissions to Council and VCAT, our group was able to achieve conservation zones along approx. 1000 metres of the creek, to fenced off from cattle, revegetated, with controls of pest species all mandated in a 173 Agreement. Monbulk Creek contains the last population of platypus in the Dandenong Catchment and if wasn't for community action here, no permanent protections or access for Melbourne Water would have been possible.

In our experience, councillors and their planning departments (including both Knox and Yarra Ranges) often make little effort to protect these high-value environmental areas on private land areas when the opportunity arises. Often (ironically) through the subdivision-application process, an opportunity arises for councils to request landscape-management improvements as part of permit conditions. However, in our experience, they frequently choose not to do this or ask for only weak improvements in landscape and

creek management. We have experienced council and private land-owners attempting to proceed with developments and subdivisions that are contrary to the planning scheme, and we have had to go through the considerable work and expense of taking them to VCAT to prove the case. For example, Clause 14.02 of the VPP, which specifies a 30-metre buffer along waterways is never, in our experience, considered unless we force the matter, and we have found at times that councillors and even planners themselves were not even aware of this clause.

It has also been our experience that some councils sidestep their responsibilities towards good management of the environment and this is done through various underhanded means with the main objective of bringing in more money. A case in point is Yarra Ranges Council's C148 amendment currently before the planning minister. Usually, a subdivision application is subject to the Subdivision Act and Clause 53 of the VPP, requiring a contribution to public open space. Even when nothing is specified in the schedule, Clause 53 states that a contribution may still be required under the Act. However, Yarra Ranges Council is 'cancelling' this obligation through the proposed C148 Amendment, which declares that the public space requirement will not be required for land outside the Urban Growth Boundary. Most of the Yarra Ranges lies outside of the UGB and our major creeks and rivers originate or flow through the 2,447 kms of the shire. Hence, if C148 is approved, we will lose an important mechanism for saving land alongside creeks or billabongs and creating much needed 'safe-haven' riparian corridors for hundreds of threatened species.

It should not be up to the community to have to continually undertake these exhausting, 'tooth and nail' fights to achieve basic environmental protections for the areas in which we live. We seem to be the only ones doing this and we are up against wealthy developers greedy for money, councils wanting the income from rates, and often the State Government itself – ruthlessly selling off land that it tells us is 'surplus'. There are numerous examples of this in Knox alone. A pertinent example is the current development of the old agricultural station and 'Lake Knox' in Ferntree Gully (managed by DELWP), which has been handed over to Development Victoria (without going to tender). The entire process has been an absolute travesty in terms of community consultation, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the community feels it has been lied to and 'trampled on' at every stage of the process.

The main concerns relating to the 'Lake Knox' development centre on the preservation of the existing lake and existing ecosystem, which is home to the endangered blue-billed duck and many other species. Development Victoria (DV) insist they can 'fill in' the lake and in its place create sedimentation ponds, which will collect polluted run-off from the massively over-developed site, and they claim this will function as a wetland. However, their entire argument is based on the false premise that ecosystems can be magically 'relocated', and DV have no data on other so-called 'wetlands' they have created in other housing developments – they have never done any followed up to check if birds are actually inhabiting their 'wetlands'. But we know, from data from Birdlife Australia, that there are currently 119 different species using the site, of which 12 have 'threatened' status on the *Advisory List of Threatened Vertebrate Fauna in Victoria*. Also, 3 birds are on the JAMBA and CAMBA lists. This attitude on behalf of DV is typical of what the community finds itself up against in defending their local environment and rare and threatened species.

Our community is also concerned about intense overdevelopment on the Lake Knox site and lack of green, open space. Again, there is no thought evident on the part of the developer as to 'liveability' and health of humans in the context of healthy of the environment – and the right of other species to exist alongside us. The masterplan for the Lake Knox site is a good example of the 'smoke and mirrors', disingenuous way in which the public are treated by authorities, businesses and wealthy individuals who place their desire for maximum profit first and human health and environment last. We believe it is possible for development to proceed in a way that is consistent with environmental values rather than contrary to them – it just

needs more patience and creative thinking, and more preparedness to **genuinely** consult with the community over issues that affect us (and future generations) profoundly.

An important factor that must be taken into account in any discussion on species decline is that once the genetic diversity is lost, we cannot 'get it back' – and this represents a profound misunderstanding that is pushing entire species to the brink of extinction. Remnant bush can ever be replaced by 'revegetation', a fact that is recognised in the scientific community (and acknowledged in the current EPBC Act review in relation to native vegetation offsets). You cannot simply 'move' an entire biosystem that has existed for hundreds of years to a new location. We need to recognise that we, as humans, have the greatest adaptive capacity compared to any other species, so it is we who need to be flexible and creative in finding solutions that allow us to create our built environment in a manner that does not totally extinguish the habitat of other species – the onus is on us. Other species can't act for us, but we can act for them . . . it is our moral obligation to do so.

Another factor that is not emphasised enough is the importance of urban areas and Melbourne's Green Wedges in halting species extinction. The Green-Wedge areas have a vital role to play because apart from remnant forest, of which little is left in Victoria, Green Wedges are arguably one of the last major depositories of genetic material (remnant seed). In city areas, the genetic material of remnant species is extinct, although good work is being done to 'rehabilitate' along rivers and parklands (e.g. Darebin Parklands). This work in rehabilitating is vital of course; however, revegetation should never be looked upon as the first option; rather, it is always the second option. The first step must always be to conserve and protect the existing vegetation (and associated gene pool). Then, for those areas where it has already been lost, we begin the processes of rehabilitation.

In rural areas, although small patches of remnant remain, mass clearing for agricultural purposes has often meant huge losses in native vegetation and threats to the survival of other species. We do recognise the more enlightened, modern farming practices are starting to show understanding of the benefits to farming more environmentally-sensitive practices including revegetation for shelter and wind breaks and protection of waterways, but this is happening much too infrequently and slowly. Hence, the Green Wedges, in their role as a green buffer between cities and rural (and connecting links within the Green Wedges themselves) have a critical role to play in the survival of species – and the good health of humans. There is a plethora of scientific evidence proving the importance of connecting corridors particularly in urban areas, and this is one of the keys to survival of threatened species, given that human impact around the world is one of increasing urbanisation. Hence, government policy must focus on how to preserve existing corridors and build and maintain new ones in city and urban areas as much as rural in we are to halt the decline in ecosystems in Victoria.

Every time the community is told by developers, council, planning panels and other authorities that we must be prepared to 'compromise', we often point out that in Knox, we have already compromised at a ratio of 98% (us) to 3% (developers), and when we are asked to further compromise, this brings us to the brink of 100% comprise on our part – there will soon be nothing left to compromise. When you have only 3% remnant vegetation as in Knox, lots of 'small compromises' add up significantly and the overall result is catastrophic, which is why we are facing mass extinctions of species.

For this reason, groups such as FGGW find themselves continually in the position (in addition to all their work on the ground in rehabilitating and caring for local sites) of having to lobby council, state and federal governments, appearing before VCAT, and planning panels, or participating in community consultations such as the Healthy Waterways Strategy, in order to have some input. In many ways, we become the last line of defence because governments do not have the will to put into place the necessary legislation and to implement it. However, government should be the first line of defence, and we call on governments at all levels to acknowledge their responsibilities and put the environment first. Instead, we see the massive

failures as can be seen in the State-Government owned VicForests illegal logging of our precious old-growth forests and habitat for species such as the critically endangered Leadbeater's possum. For many people in the community, this is heartbreaking.

The current pandemic is proof that we can't have healthy economy without people being in good health, but the part of the equation that governments often overlook is that people's health depends on health of the environment. We need to ensure the survival of every species, not just our own – all species matter – because we are all interconnected and interdependent.

Committee of the Friends of the Glenfern Green Wedge

29 August, 2020