



Submission To: Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

From: The Bayside Climate Crisis Action Group &
Port Phillip Emergency Climate Action Network

August 2020

Who We Are?

The Bayside Climate Crisis Action Group (BCCAG) is a non-profit community organisation centred on the Bayside City area, that works to reduce the impact of climate change and promote sustainability. Amongst our 800+ members are professionals, business owners, parents, teachers, students and academics all of whom share a vision of 'A Safe Climate for All'.

Port Phillip Emergency Climate Action Network (PECAN) is a non-partisan network of 12 environment groups centred on the municipal area of Port Phillip. The Network was formed to bring together groups that recognise the climate emergency and to create and sustain a strong climate action movement in Port Phillip to address the climate crisis.

What this is About?

The Victorian Parliament has initiated an inquiry into ecosystem decline with reference to the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity; the likely impact on people and ecosystems with consideration to climate change; the adequacy of the current legislation and the opportunities to restore the environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria.

Why are Ecosystems Important?

As reported by the World Health Organisation '*Healthy communities rely on well-functioning ecosystems. They provide clean air, fresh water, medicines and food security. They also limit disease and stabilize the climate. But biodiversity loss is happening at unprecedented rates, impacting human health worldwide...*'¹

Our submission acknowledges the Victorian National Parks Association (VPNA) submission into this inquiry; however, we wish to express the increasing concern of our members regarding ecosystem loss and its impacts, and in particular the impact of ecosystem loss on the climate crisis and, in turn, the impact of the climate crisis on the eco-system.

Drivers of Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

The drivers for ecosystem decline are many and varied. As stated in the 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report, '*Victoria has experienced extensive biodiversity loss over the past two centuries due to land clearing, fire, pest plants and animals, land development, river regulation, water pollution*

*and, more recently, reduced resilience under climate change. This loss and degradation impacts the supply of essential ecosystem services, posing a potential risk to sectors dependent on functioning ecosystems and the future health, wellbeing and prosperity of all Victorian communities.'*²

Other drivers include native forest logging, inadequate legislation to protect the environment and rapid population growth. Victoria has the highest population growth of all Australian States and an over-reliance on population-driven economic growth. This has resulted in irreversible land clearing and fragmentation of ecosystems. Further, it has impacted Victoria's First Nations People for whom a healthy country is fundamental to their cultural, spiritual, physical and economic wellbeing'.³

A key factor in all of the drivers above is economic growth without an understanding of, or consideration for, the long-term impact on the interdependent ecosystems of the environment (land, air and water) and the Victorian and First Nations People and their livelihoods and health. Our food supply, the quality of our air we breathe and the natural surrounds that we enjoy daily, are all dependent on a healthy and diverse ecosystem.

Impact

The climate crisis is exacerbating the drivers of ecosystem decline with record breaking higher temperatures and reduced rainfall, creating increasingly longer and hotter fire seasons that are driving rapid habitat destruction and species extinction.⁴ The ecosystem decline in turn impacts climate change, such as deforestation which releases carbon dioxide and reduces the carbon sequestering capacity of our land.

In 2019/2020, we experienced unprecedented bushfires across Victoria which caused an ecological disaster. The fires destroyed 1.4 million hectares in Victoria, including East Gippsland's ancient eucalyptus rainforests, further impacting on threatened species.⁵ It is estimated that three billion animals were killed or displaced including mammals, reptiles and birds.⁶ Estimates also suggest 212 rare or threatened plant and animal species lost at least 50% of their habitat.⁷

Increased rates of coastal erosion are also being experienced around the entire coast of Victoria as a consequence of a combination of greater storm surges and rising sea levels attributed to climate change.⁸

Aside from these impacts, it is important to recognise that tourism contributes \$26 billion to the Victorian economy annually, of which \$1.4 billion is spent in visits to Victoria's parks to experience the natural environment and creates 14,000 jobs.⁹ Loss of our ecosystems and their quality will impact Victoria's thriving eco-tourism.

Recommendations and Opportunities

In addition to the VNPA recommendations which we strongly support, and in light of the ecological and climate crisis that is upon us, we urge the Victorian government to:

- 1) Ensure Government accountability on inaction and lack of transparency that has contributed to the decline of nature and species extinction
- 2) Demand a rapid transition away from the practices of the past - extractive industries can no longer be given a free pass from impacting Victoria's nature

- 3) Strengthen our state environmental laws and close the loopholes that allow exploitation of the environment. For too long, rogue operators have been let off the hook and regulators have turned a blind eye to illegal logging
- 4) Help create a resilient future for Victorian nature, wildlife and communities that we can all depend upon.
- 5) Support sustainable economic development policies rather those that provide short term financial gains at the expense of the environment and the Victorian and First Nations peoples. Rather than relying on population growth, such policies will:
 - i. promote a circular economy,
 - ii. promote industries of the future that will thrive on a cheap renewable energy resource.
- 6) Protect our native forests and transition to plantation only timber logging as soon as possible; cease subsidizing VicForests' logging and destruction of state forests and threatened species habitat.
- 7) With regards to the climate crisis, we call on the Victorian government to:
 - i. declare an ecological and climate emergency
 - ii. introduce interim emissions reductions targets in accordance with the independent expert panel report chaired by the Hon Greg Combet AM with a reduction of emissions by 32-39% below 2005 levels by 2025 and 45-60% below 2005 levels by 2030.¹⁰
 - iii. develop policies to incentivise a rapid transition out of fossil fuel dependency, including gas.
 - iv. support Indigenous-led fire and land management practices as recommended in the Australian and Bushfire Climate Plan (priority recommendation 11).¹¹

References

¹ WHO June 2015: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/biodiversity-and-health>

² https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018ScientificAssessment_B.pdf

³ https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018ScientificAssessment_B.pdf

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-0720-5-climate-impact-with-rising-temperatures>

⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1089996/australia-total-area-burned-by-bushfires-by-state/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/28/almost-3-billion-animals-affected-by-australian-megafires-report-shows-aoe>

⁷ <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/home/biodiversity-bushfire-response-and-recovery>

⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/erosion-from-surgings-seas-threaten-roads-homes-and-beaches-20200517-p54tpu.html>

⁹ https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018ScientificAssessment_B.pdf

¹⁰ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/hdp.au.prod.app.vic-engage.files/4115/5859/1753/Final_Report_Interim_Emissions_Reduction_Targets.pdf

¹¹ <https://emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au/australian-bushfire-climate-plan/>