

Mark Cummings



30 August 2020

The Committee Manager  
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Committee Members

### **Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline**

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline and loss of biodiversity in Victoria.

#### **Introduction**

I am an ordinary member of the Victorian voting public and do not represent any political party, group or association. My family and I are campers and bushwalkers in many of Victoria's beautiful places including Wilsons Prom, the Otways, Western Victoria and the Howqa River area, which we highly value.

I feel compelled to make this submission at this time because I am extremely concerned about the declining health of Victoria's natural environment. It is surely now well beyond doubt that we all depend on a healthy natural environment for our own health and wellbeing. We are also now increasingly understanding of how inter-connected and reliant all flora and fauna are on each other in our ecosystems from mammals to plants to fungi to microscopic microbes and bacteria. This includes of course how intimately we as humans also rely on healthy and biodiverse ecosystems for the food we eat and the water we drink.

A strong healthy and abundant biodiverse natural environment is essential for our well-being in Victoria and it is vitally important for all MPs of all stripes in the Victorian parliament including the Victorian Government, to do whatever it takes to protect and restore our environment.

In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of Victoria's environment. The findings released in 2019 disclose a rapid and alarming decline in the health of Victoria's natural environment – yet no action plan or response from the Government has yet been produced. We cannot stand idle and unresponsive any longer. Instead, we need to take urgent action to restore our environment to good health.

#### **Drivers of Decline in Victoria's Environment**

There are several key drivers of the decline in Victoria's ecosystems, wildlife and biodiversity. The main drivers together with a brief action plan, are as follows:

1. *Land clearing and deforestation*

Logging and clearing of native forests and other vegetation over many years has destroyed huge swathes of habitat and with it all the animals, plants, birds and a vast range of floral and faunal species. This is the singular most important issue to be acted upon to arrest the decline in the natural environment. Victoria must immediately transition out of native forest logging and to exit existing Regional Forest Agreements with the Commonwealth. The Federal Court has recently found that logging continues in Victoria by the State owned Vicforests illegally – ie; in breach of current national laws and regulations. I urge you to bring your collective full weight to bear and recommend to the government to bring forward to January 2021 existing plans to finally end native logging in Victoria and to fund forest and timber workers into transition programs toward the plantation timber industry or other industries where appropriate.

2. *Climate change*

The impact of increasing temperatures through global warming is having a profound impact on our planet including in Victoria. It is causing more frequent and longer droughts and consequentially more devastating bushfires as we have seen in the last 2 years. The result of course is the devastation of native habitat across millions of hectares of forest killing an estimated one billion creatures. Victoria must urgently stop burning fossil fuels that is the main cause of global warming (ie; coal, oil and gas) and replace these energy sources with renewable sources.

3. *Invasive species*

Introduced plants and animals have a very significant impact on the environment and native flora in particular. Government needs to act quickly and decisively to implement programs to eradicate introduced plants and animals and to fund widespread programs to restore habitat as best we can particularly in areas that are adjacent to existing high ecological value areas.

4. *Lack of pro-active planning by Government*

As well as programs to remove introduced species, I urge you to consider pro-active programs to restore and support threatened species in their natural habitats – to plan and fund active conservation of species. Variations on this theme (adopted by some conservation groups) would be partnering with private ownership for land and species conservation - eg; the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

5. *Lack of effective State laws to protect the environment, species and ecosystems*

The main State laws for the protection of species and habitat in Victoria is the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (Act)*. However, as the Commissioner's 2018 report found, the state of Victoria's environment has deteriorated which clearly shows that the Act is failing Victorians. The reason for this is that the Act lacks teeth to operate independently of government policy or interests. The powers in the Act to protect the environment against development is subject to Ministerial discretion. I submit that the Act needs to be comprehensively reformed to at least remove ministerial discretion to intervene and amend the Act be more prescriptive on the action the Minister must take to protect the environment or to refer matters to an independent panel of experts for review and recommendation.

## Conclusion

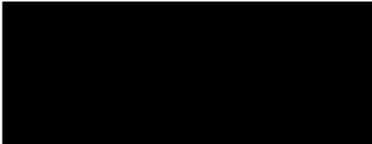
I appreciate these times of COVID-19 are difficult for all of us including the Victorian Government and that focus on the pandemic is a top priority for Government – as it should be. However, the existential threats to our environment are equally real and on all of the creatures and plant life in the Victorian environment, equally as threatening and devastating. These threats will not disappear during the pandemic. They must be addressed as another urgent priority before it is too late and we

lose this opportunity to repair and restore our natural environment and biodiversity and save and protect for future generations, the unique flora and fauna of Victoria.

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

I am happy for this submission to be made public.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Mark Cummings.

Mark Cummings