

Submission to Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

30 August 2020

My name is Mark Keehn and I care about the environment in Victoria. I am mature age student pursuing a Degree in Environmental and Conservation Science. I worry that I may not have an environment left to conserve by the time I finish my degree.

I thank the Environment and Planning Standing Committee of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Victoria for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Ecosystem Decline is rampant in Victoria. While there are a variety of issues which should be of concern to the Inquiry, I shall briefly expand on what I believe to be the 3 main drivers: Government Inaction, Commercial Benefit, and Social Inequity.

But first, I wish to establish a link between Ecosystem Decline and Biodiversity Decline in Victoria. The two terms could almost be used interchangeably, but a healthy ecosystem relies on high biodiversity, and vice versa. Environmental change (loss, degradation or fragmentation) is the most threatening process to impact Biodiversity. Some of these changes could be considered natural, but most have a foundation in anthropogenic activities.

Secondly, I am assuming that this inquiry relates to natural ecosystems as opposed to anthropogenic ecosystems such as could be found in urban environments or on farms. Not that these anthropogenic environments do not provide refuges for native fauna and flora, but the size and connectedness of these refuges rarely outweigh the threats imposed upon them by anthropogenic factors.

A few quick facts

- Australia has the world's highest rate of mammal extinction
- 2/3rds of the Victorian land area has been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants
- More than 700 native plants, animals, and insects are under threat
- About 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are at the brink of extinction.
- At least 70 threatened species live in forests currently being logged
- Victoria has the dubious honour of having the only reptile on mainland Australia to be presumed extinct since colonization. The Victorian grassland earless dragon (*Tympanocryptis pinguicolla*) was last recorded in 1969.
- At least 8 species of mammals have been presumed extinct in Victoria since European settlement.
- The southern bent wing bat is 1 of 5 critically endangered mammals listed in Australia occurring in Victoria
- Around 40 plants in Victoria are currently listed as critically endangered or endangered.
- A noticeable decline in insects has occurred over the past decade creating a pollination problem for farmers and nature alike.

Government Inaction

The failure of governments to act on environmental protection is, disappointing at best, criminal at worst. The range of inactions or mis-actions include broken electoral promises, failure to enforce its own regulations, prioritising short term economic gain over long term ecosystem health, denying climate change, stifling protests and bowing to powers not in the long term national interest. A proposal to reduce planning approval red tape will do nothing to protect ecosystems.

The federal *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) is seen as a toothless tiger. Referrals to the EPBC Act frequently do not occur unless someone happens to spot a questionable activity. Too many infringements go un-investigated, un-remediated or inadequately prosecuted. There are too many developments that have been allowed to proceed because of environmental offsets offered by the developer. But how viable or real those offsets may be are questionable. How can you offset damage to one ecosystem by replacing it with another ecosystem. In this case ecosystem change equates to ecosystem decline.

The Western Grassland Reserve was promised by the Victorian Government of 2009 to offset grassland destruction by Melbourne's creeping urban sprawl. Acquisition was originally scheduled for completion by 2020, however as of mid-2019, only 10% of the proposed 14000+hectares has been secured for the reserve. While an acquisition overlay has been applied to the properties affected by the proposal, mining exploration licences have apparently been issued recently in the vicinity. This potentially violates an agreement between state and federal governments which requires the land be preserved for its conservation values. The western volcanic plains is one bioregion under extreme stress from urban development. And it is one of the most poorly represented bioregions in Victoria

Doubts about climate change, whether it be the cause, timing, severity or effect continue to hamper governments, businesses and individuals. Youth protests in the Climate Revolution, supported by prominent scientists, create more uncertainty. However, I believe the precautionary principal should be implemented here. In science, this refers to taking the advice that will lead to the least harm should the worst scenario eventuate. A principal that in my opinion, should be implemented in regard to all environmental policy.

Funding cuts to Victoria's National Parks in state government budgets makes effective protection of all current national parks problematic, at best. Fire hazard reduction activities last summer by DEWLP apparently were affected by funding and bad weather.

Commercial Benefit

At the time of producing this submission, the environment assessment of AGL's proposal for the Crib Point Gas Import Facility and Gas Pipeline Project was also underway. This is one example where Victoria's ecosystem and biodiversity could be adversely affected if the project were to proceed. Construction and continued operations may require dredging of sea lanes. As the gas is liquified for transport, the regasification process utilizes an intake of local seawater for heat exchange and releasing a cooled chlorinated waste stream back into the ocean, altering the chemistry and temperature of nearby waters. This would not only affect the seagrass nurseries surrounding the Crib Point Jetty but would extend threaten, amongst other things, the Ramsar Listed Wetlands of Westernport Bay, the Little Penguins of Phillip Island and the migrating Humpback and Southern Right Whales.

Further damage to this ecosystem could come from pollution (light, noise, temperate, visual, or chemical), biosecurity impacts (invasive marine species brought in by tankers either in

their bilge water or on their hulls), economic impacts (through fishing, farming or tourism losses), social actions (including protest actions and terrorism threats) or accidents (boat strikes, oil spills). The ecosystem services provided by the Ramsar Listed Wetlands of Westernport Bay extend beyond the marine environment to include water filtration and sediment control.

Australia has committed to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands as a signatory of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. This is understood as the maintenance of their ecological character and preventing their degradation. It is inappropriate to build and operate a gas import terminal in the middle of one of the most precious environments in Victoria and an internationally significant wetland.

Quarrying and other extractive industries, while essential to the economic prosperity of Victoria, unfortunately occurs in or near sensitive ecosystems. Open cut mines and quarries create long term damage or changes to the areas in which they operate. To their credit, some of the large local enterprises have undertaken revegetation of their expended sites. But this is little compensation for the changes they have imposed in the meantime. While it is relatively easy to replace the original vegetation, recreating the ecosystem is much more complex and no-one has a full understanding of what is actually involved. To start with, there is still so much we do not know about soil biota. And while plants may be replaced quickly, habitat will take much longer to establish. Tree hollows utilized by many Australian birds and mammals for nesting, for instance, could take hundreds of years to form.

Current logging of native forests is another activity that is unsustainable and threatens ecosystems and eco-services. Trees are a carbon sink. Old growth forests are better sinks than mature forests which are still better than regrowth. Forests around water catchments assist with the provision of water quality by stabilizing the soils and reducing runoff. Studies have shown that old growth forests are less likely to burn and burn cooler than regrowth.

Trees also cool the environment. Infrared photography used in remote sensing shows forests are cooler than grassland, farmland or urban areas.

Social Inequities

Everyone wants a home. Everyone deserves a home. And every organism on earth deserves to be respected for the role it plays in its ecosystem.

Unfortunately, in this anthropogenic dominated world, nature takes a back seat. But it is nature that provides us with fresh air, clean water, the ground we stand on, build on, mine for resources and grow our food on. Until recently, Nature has provided the majority of the timber we use in construction and been the source of many of our medicines.

Ecosystem decline threatens all this. And at this time, we do not have the technology to replace all of the services that ecosystem diversity provides to us.

The First Peoples of Australia maintained a balance with nature. Growing evidence casts increasing doubt on the doctrine of Terra Nullius. The way we have treated the land and its original inhabitants is unjustified, at best.

Affluence is no excuse for wanton destruction of the environment. Neither is ignorance. But if the meed shall inherit the earth, what state will it be in after the affluent rape, pillage and plunder it. What is the statistic? According to Oxfam, 8 men control half of the wealth on earth. How much could those 8 men afford if there was no fresh air to breathe.

The recent Climate Strikes by the youth of the world also highlights a temporal social inequality. Past and current generations are responsible for the damage that has been done to the earth's ecosystems, but it is the future generations that will have to pay for that damage. Time waits for no man.

Developments that risks environmental damage makes no sense to me and I cannot understand how activities that threaten the lives or livelihoods of residents and visitors (human or otherwise) to Victoria can be tolerated.

Conclusion

The number of catch phrases becoming popular in social media is increasing lately, phrases such as "How Dare You", "Not On Planet Earth", "There is no Planet B", and the one I wish to endorse "Extinction is Forever". We should take better care of our environment, before it takes care of us!

Thank you once again for opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

If necessary, I will be pleased to elaborate on any of the issued I have raised above.

Sincerely,

Mark Keehn