

## INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA

This letter hopes to contribute to the support of a significant increase in measures being taken to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species in Victoria.

The continual population growth, combined with the negative effects of climate change and mismanagement of our native ecosystems has placed significant pressure on our threatened and endangered species in Victoria. The native forest logging industry contributes to fragmentation and damage of habitat areas, whilst the expansion of outer suburbs contributes in a similar way. Both of which need to be more closely monitored and controlled.

The new amendments to the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act that came into effect on 1 June 2020 somewhat improved the legislation however, threatened species protection should not be left to the discretion of ever-changing government ministers with fluid party agendas. Action statements and management plans are needed to guide and implement conservation action for all listed species and communities. Critical habitat determinations need to be mandatory to enable the environment minister to use habitat conservation orders in urgent conservation situations, whilst the public authorities must be aware of their new duty to consider biodiversity conservation and the objectives of the *act*. The Biodiversity Strategy needs to be updated and strengthened so that it relates to the objectives of the *act* and incorporates the use of available legal conservation tools.

The Ramsar Convention provides a framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources, yet in Victoria there are inadequate funding arrangements to effectively maintain supporting programs. Similarly, the internationally recognised framework of action and cooperation is too easily pushed aside when development opportunities are being considered. AGL's gas import terminal in Westernport as one current example where the significance of the ecosystems of the area are effectively forgotten.

Victoria's highly endangered temperate grasslands and grassy eucalypt woodlands can also be considered in this light. Whilst there has been an acknowledgement of each environment's significance, there has been lack any considerable, promised action.

Introduced pest animals and plants are one of the top contributors to the decline and extinction of Victoria's threatened species. There is an important need to adequately declare invasive pest animals and plants in legislation, including specifically declaring deer a pest species, and release a detailed state-wide deer control strategy, supported by expansion of funding and planning for control measures and mitigating impacts.

With the impact still being felt of the recent bushfire season, the transition of the native forest logging industry to plantation only timber production by 2030 needs to be brought forward. The West Regional Forest Agreement needs to be abandoned and a review conducted of all Regional Forest Agreements in wake of the landscape-scale fire. VicForests should not be permitted to receive tax dollars to subsidize the logging and destruction of public native forests and threatened species habitat and the \$3.3 million grant that is due to expire this year for “Western Community Forestry”, should not be renewed to prop up the damaging logging industry in the region.

Whilst these examples relate to areas directly and currently under threat, the already protected habitats on public and private land continue to lack support. Permanently protected habitats on public and private land form the backbone of our society’s efforts to conserve our natural heritage and its rich biodiversity. Victoria’s national parks and conservation estate, areas protected by legislation, are also a key community asset. They provide great benefit to people as well as to nature. National Parks are good for people and nature, including the economy. A significant increase in funding (to at least 1% of state annual expenditure) needs to be made, in addition to resources and expertise for habitat restoration programs and ecosystem management in national parks and conservation reserves. There is a need to significantly expand programs for ongoing biodiversity surveying and monitoring across Victoria’s various terrestrial, riparian, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems in national parks and reserves, as well as expanded support for citizen science programs. This effort can be supported with further backing of community engagement, including ‘Friends’ groups to increase community connection to parks and reserves.

Although we have a network of 13 marine national parks and 11 smaller sanctuaries, a mere 5.3% of our waters in Victoria are covered in no-take areas – the lowest of any Australian state, well below international benchmarks for marine protected areas. Currently the Andrews Government has a formal policy ban on creating new marine national parks and sanctuaries, even though expert bodies like the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council have shown clear gaps in our network of marine national parks and sanctuaries –and recommended that these gaps be filled. There is an obvious need to create new marine national parks and sanctuaries, and a state-wide ecosystem based marine spatial plan.

I hope that these points can be considered during the inquiry and that decisions regarding our natural world can be positive contributions to its future in Victoria.

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