

Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Dear members of the Committee, I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

I live on a 145ha property near Halls Gap in the Grampians which I manage for biodiversity values. The property is in the final stages of being placed under a Trust for Nature conservation covenant. I have a professional background in forest ecology and soil science and was formerly a Senior Principal Research Scientist with, and Assistant Chief of, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems. I am currently Board Chair of the Project Platypus Landcare Network.

I am deeply concerned that Victoria's unique natural ecosystems and biodiversity, already significantly impoverished, continue to show widespread and serious decline. The agents of Victoria's ecosystem decline are well recognised (1) habitat loss through land clearing for development and (2) habitat degradation through fragmentation/isolation, introduced weeds, and feral animals. These processes will be exacerbated by climate change. That Victoria is currently failing to adequately address these issues is clearly highlighted in the Victorian State of Environment 2018 Report (<https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE-2018-summary-report.pdf>)

Issues that particularly concern me include

1. Extant environmental policy and regulatory frameworks controlling development are fragmented and operate on a case by case basis. They do not consider the long-term cumulative impact of development on ecosystem fragmentation, habitat degradation, and loss. This results in a gradual but progressive erosion of Victoria's remnant natural ecosystems.

A subset of this issue relates to Offsets. It is unclear to me that the extant regulatory framework for vegetation/biodiversity Offsets results in a net biodiversity improvement. The whole framework would appear to be more around finding a mechanism to allow developments to go ahead rather than protecting and enhancing biodiversity. I would like to see a rigorous and objective external review of Victoria's Offset legislation to ensure Victorians that the process genuinely results in a significant net improvement in the State's biodiversity.

2. The biodiversity baseline against which success is measured is set far too low and fails to consider the "shifting baseline" syndrome (Pauly D. 1995. Anecdotes and the shifting base-line syndrome of fisheries. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **10**(10):430.). Briefly, a shifting baseline occurs where each new generation assumes the environmental conditions they experienced as they grew up are the norm. This leads to a rapid and progressive decline in individual and societal standards for acceptable environmental conditions. While it is imperative that further degradation of Victoria's biodiversity is arrested it needs to be recognised that simply maintaining the current status quo should be considered an acceptable outcome. The majority of Victoria's

terrestrial ecosystems are already significantly impoverished compared to 25, 50, 75, 100 years ago. Adopting the contemporary situation as a baseline will not address this historical loss, nor does it recognise the enormity of what has already been lost. Biodiversity 2037 proposes a laudable suite of actions to arrest the appalling decline in biodiversity and resilience of Victoria's natural ecosystems. However, the value of the entire plan is seriously undermined by setting the baseline by which improvement will be measured too low.

3. The State government must urgently implement and properly resource Action Statements (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements. These Action Statements need to be resourced to actually deliver quantifiable outcomes. They need to include a well-publicised point of contact for private landowners to (i) register the occurrence of threatened species on their property, and (ii) receive guidance and resourcing to protect those species.

- a. Case study. In February 2018 we discovered a population of the Southern Brown Bandicoot on our property. This species is listed as Threatened under the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988, and as Endangered under the Federal EPBC Act. It is our understanding that bandicoots are now known from only a few locations in the Grampians National Park. The newly discovered Fyans Creek bandicoots are therefore regionally very important.

Given the significance of the discovery I had supposed that (i) relevant authorities would be very interested in the information and (ii) we might receive guidance on managing the area to favour and protect the bandicoot population, and (iii) some resources would be available to help us do this. This has not been the case.

I was perplexed to find that there was no clear pathway/mechanism readily accessible to a private individual to report a threatened species discovery. There needs to be a well-publicised mechanism for private landholders to report issues relating to threatened species, obtain advice on management, and advice on how to obtain resources to protect threatened species on their land.

4. As an urgent priority Victoria needs a new, independent, well-resourced conservation regulator. The EPA is the independent watchdog for pollution, but currently there is no independent watchdog to ensure industries and individuals comply with environmental laws, with numerous breaches to laws continuing to occur, a long history of regulators turning a blind eye, and minimal penalties when cases are brought to court, e.g. poisoned eagles in Gippsland, Koalas and blue gum plantations in SW Victoria.

Such a regulator should oversee issues of illegal native vegetation clearing as it is my experience that local councils are unwilling, unable, or both to police this. Similarly, the issue of illegal firewood collection falls across at least four State organisations (Councils, Parks Victoria, DEWLP, and Vic Roads) making it very difficult for individuals to report illegal activity. There is no facility to report illegal activity outside normal office hours.

It needs to be recognised that halting and reversing the appalling decline in Victoria's biodiversity will come at a cost, directly in funding for better regulation and support and indirectly in disallowing developments that will further erode Victoria's biodiversity. Without genuine political will to meet these costs I am pessimistic that the current situation will improve.

Dr Clive Carlyle

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