

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 am a rural General Practitioner and live on a property near Stawell in the Grampians. I am passionate about protecting and restoring Victoria's unique biodiversity and am deeply concerned by its continued decline and apparent inaction on behalf of the State to address this.

a. The Extent of the decline is outlined in Victoria's State of Environment report card 2018.

<https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE-2018-indicator-report-card.pdf>

It is clear there are significant issues with respect to water, air, land, biodiversity, climate change, transport and waste management.

I believe that if nothing is done to stop this decline then our health both mental and physical, and our quality of life will be severely impacted upon.

The [Lancet countdown](#) tracks the connections between public health and climate change. Climate change is a public health issue.

In 2017, the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) started its own *MJA - Lancet Countdown* and in 2018 found:

"that, overall, Australia is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change on health, and that policy inaction in this regard threatens Australian lives.

However, there continues to be no engagement on health and climate change in the Australian federal Parliament, and Australia performs poorly across many of the indicators in comparison to other developed countries; for example, it is one of the world's largest net exporters of coal and its electricity generation from low carbon sources is low. We also find significantly increasing exposure of Australians to heatwaves and, in most states and territories, continuing elevated suicide rates at higher temperatures.

We conclude that Australia remains at significant risk of declines in health due to climate change, and that substantial and sustained national action is urgently required in order to prevent this."

If we continue on the same greenhouse gas emission trajectory then a child born today will live in a world that is 4 degrees hotter experiencing:

- Increasing air pollution – lung and heart disease and cancers
- Food insecurity – obesity, diabetes and malnutrition
- Heat waves - heat stress, heat exhaustion, dehydration and renal impairments,
- Increasing storms and bushfires - lung and heart disease and cancer, mental illness and suicide.
- insect borne diseases will move further south – e.g. dengue, Ross River and malaria.
- Increasing poverty
- Increasing mental illness and suicide.

Recently, an article in the Medical Journal of Australia reported on the unprecedented smoke related health burden of last summer's bushfires:

“We estimated that bushfire smoke was responsible for 417 (95% CI, 153–680) excess deaths, 1124 (95% CI, 211–2047) hospitalisations for cardiovascular problems and 2027 (95% CI, 0–4252) for respiratory problems, and 1305 (95% CI, 705–1908) presentations to emergency departments with asthma.”

- b. The current system is failing in all these areas. We need strong environmental laws and enforcement to protect grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species. **I support the recommendations made in the State of Environment Victorian report 2018.**¹

Examples

Water

Particularly concerning is the quality of our surface and groundwater and the security of our water supplies.

I live in a rural area and the dams are not filling this year. Water security is a big issue.

The nearby lakes are only partly full at the end of winter.

This will mean that there will be conflicts over water use. Will we have environmental flows or will water be kept in the lakes for recreation and fishermen. This is the same year after year and will only get worse as our rainfall continues to decline.

There are no platypus in the Wimmera River any more. I would like to know why this is and what monitoring is occurring? Is there inadequate water, too much turbulence, too much agricultural runoff, too many carp. The current system is not improving numbers of native species.

I support the State of Victoria’s environment report recommendations 11 and 12².

Air quality monitoring

I work in Stawell and there is a gold mine here.

I am not sure if the air quality around this mine is measured and reported. In my opinion there needs to be transparent and accurate reporting of dust and chemicals around mining sites such as gold mines and quarries. Arsenic is a known carcinogen and is an airborne contaminant.

I support the State of Environments recommendation 3³ – air quality monitoring stations in regional area.

The Hazelwood Fire and subsequent study showed that there are long lasting impacts of smoke and air pollution.

Doctors for Environment Australia have reported to the Victorian enquiry into Clean Air⁴ that air pollution increases the risk of cancer and is costly.

¹ https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018_Table6.pdf

² https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018_Table6.pdf

³ https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018_Table6.pdf

⁴ https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/395195/Doctors-for-the-Environment-Australia.pdf

Soil and Land

The State of Environment report outlines that there is a failure to follow best practice for management of agricultural land and a failure to use sustainable agricultural practices.

Clearly the current management system is failing and there needs to be more work done to help farmers/agricultural businesses manage their land to store carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to care for soil.

Protection of wetlands

The Victorian Native Parks Association says⁵ : More than a quarter of Victoria's wetlands have been lost since European settlement, and the remaining are mostly in poor condition.

Permanent and seasonal wetlands, rivers and creeks need protection under State law. Riparian zones are important habitats and provide a buffer for the wetlands. If all riparian zones were revegetated then this would prevent erosion and improve water quality.

In the region where I live the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority has a program to restore wetlands and provide funding to landholders to control weeds and fence off areas along waterways and swamps. We have benefitted from this program and now have a restored wetland. Such programs should be continued and expanded.

Funding for introduced weed and animal control.

I live in a rural area and there are increasing weeds and pest animals.

It is impossible to get action on weed management. The current systems do not work and do not acknowledge that early action saves thousands of hours and dollars of time and money.

For example: Gazanias are a declared weed in SA, but not one in Victoria.

Gazanias have the potential to spread along our road sides from Melbourne to Adelaide and into agricultural and conservation land with an economic and biodiversity impact.

I have contacted DELWP and the local Shire and they are not interested to add these weeds to the list of declared weeds. If these weeds are controlled early then they will not get out of control and we will not be facing a biodiversity disaster in 10 years time.

Another example is rabbits. We have tried to release the latest calicivirus on our property but failed as the carrots were eaten by the wallabies rather than the rabbits. Surely it would be cost effective for DELWP to provide infected rabbits to local landowners to release on their properties to spread calicivirus. There must be an easier and more effective way to spread this virus to control the rabbits.

There is a lack of funding and government interest and will to provide funding for pest and weed control.

Foxes

⁵ <https://vnpa.org.au/ecosystem-decline-inquiry/>

We live next to the Grampians National Park and have been running a fox baiting program on our property now for 4 years using Canid Pest Ejectors. This has been very successful. The National Park does not do any fox baiting on our side of the range. There is a coordinated Landcare fox baiting program in the Victoria Valley which has variable success.

Supporting a fox control ranger that could work with the nearby landholders would be an effective way to improve fox control.

Cats.

I have concerns about the new licensed Curiosity Cat (PAPP) bait in Victoria. This is toxic to reptiles and we have goannas in our area. If they eat it they will die.

Eradicat Baits (1080) sausage baits are not toxic to reptiles and are used successfully in WA to eradicate cats and I believe these need to be licensed in Victoria for cat control to be used rather than the PAPP based baits.

Cat registration and control.

The local governments could do a lot more to control cat numbers and prevent strays. All cats should be registered and microchipped and be kept inside or in a cat run.

Cats do not belong in our native environment.

New cat cross breeds should not be allowed into Victoria such as domestic cat/leopard cat cross breeds.

Forests

The regional forestry agreements in Victoria have failed to protect our native forests. Forest fragmentation and habitat destruction has increased since the last report card.

Victorian Forests are not managed well, they do not meet international or national sustainable forestry practices. They are not certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council. Logging continues despite the recent bushfires. This is a failure to protect our forests.

Recently the court system found that Victorian Forests have breached their legal responsibility to protect the Leadbeater possum.

Native forestry operations in Victoria must cease. I live near Mt Cole and forestry operations need to cease here.

Native vegetation loss

The VNPA state that native vegetation continues to be lost at approximately 4,000 habitat hectares per year.⁶

Recommendation 6. https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018_Table6.pdf

⁶ https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/SoE2018ScientificAssessment_B.pdf

My understanding is that this resides with local government under the Guidelines for removal destruction and lopping of native vegetation⁷.

If local governments are to be responsible to prevent native vegetation loss and land clearing then they must have an officer who has this task and reports annually on progress made and is responsible. Currently this does not happen.

Illegal Firewood collection

I live in a rural area and throughout the year we see and hear men illegally cutting wood on the side of road and hear chainsaws. There is no one authority to control this. Parks Victoria only control in a National Park. DELWP in State Forest, Vic Roads along their roads and local government in their roads.

No one is interested or around afterhours or on weekends to ring and complain about the illegal fire wood collection.

I understand that thousands of tonnes of firewood are illegally harvested from our road sides and native reserves every year and there is no one agency responsible or funded to educate the public and stop this happening.

The Northern Grampians Shire where I reside is not interested to stop illegal fire wood collection or the illegal cutting down of trees along the road sides where I live.

There are alternatives to illegal firewood collection such as reverse cycle heating and cooling, local government run wood lots, community owned woodlots etc.

Biodiversity Loss

Birds are in decline and this is not helped by allowing duck hunting. Duck hunting should be banned in Victoria.

Kangaroos are not pest species, but native animals and as such need to be treated with the same respect given to other animals and without cruelty. I strongly believe that derogatory terminology towards kangaroos is having a detrimental impact on how they are viewed by the public. I have seen and heard of acts of unnecessary cruelty to these animals. This should be condemned under anti-cruelty laws.

Reptiles are in decline. These have an important place in our ecosystems and we need more public education to prevent cruelty to snakes and lizards. Especially on our roads. Signs could be put up near wetlands where turtles cross to advise public to slow down and watch out.

Biodiversity funding

Many of these issues would be helped by adequate funding and improved and accurate monitoring and reporting.

There are many programs that are working well and need ongoing funding.

I support funding of local government, Landcare organisation, field naturalists groups and private organisations such as Greening Australia, Nature Glenelg Trust and Trust for Nature.

⁷ https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/91146/Guidelines-for-the-removal,-destruction-or-lopping-of-native-vegetation,-2017.pdf

Support for paid staff in DELWP to support farmers, community, Landcare groups to manage their land and conservation reserves sustainably.

There needs to be more funding for re-establishment of wetlands and grasslands on both public and private land.

Waste and recycling

Victoria needs a container deposit scheme. The roads are littered with bottles and cans that could be recycled. There is far less of this type of rubbish on SA roads which have a container deposit scheme.

Transport

The Victorian Government needs to accept that we need electric cars, buses and farm vehicles and make an effort to support and promote them. Including them in their own fleets and in public transport.

Providing support for electric vehicle ownership and charging networks will improve air quality and public health plus reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lung and heart disease.

Electric vehicles are cost effective and reliable.

<https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/You-and-your-home/Live-sustainably/Transport-and-travel/Cars-including-electric>

Climate Change

I now live on a rural property in Victoria near the Grampians which have had 3 significant bushfires in the last 15 years with ongoing and devastating impacts on the local community and on the region's biodiversity.

We live in fear of more bushfires.

The Victorian government must do more to reduce their carbon footprint and to be greenhouse gas neutral. I believe coalfired power stations need to be rapidly phased out by 2030 in Victoria.

Climate change is a health emergency⁸ and as such Victoria needs a comprehensive climate change and health adaptation plan.

<https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2019/211/11/2019-report-mja-lancet-countdown-health-and-climate-change-turbulent-year-mixed>

In its MJA – Lancet Countdown report from 2018⁹ the Medical Journal of Australia states “*There are no new climate change and health adaptation plans for Australia as a whole, and Queensland is still the only state to have produced a comprehensive standalone health adaptation plan.*”

Endangered marsupials

We have a population of endangered southern brown bandicoots on our property private land. We have not had any interest from any level of government to help us manage and conserve this population. One letter from local Northern Grampians shire acknowledging they are there and not

⁸ <https://www.lancetcountdown.org/>

⁹ <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2019/211/11/2019-report-mja-lancet-countdown-health-and-climate-change-turbulent-year-mixed>

doing any burns or land clearing along the roadside where they are. One visit by a parks Victoria ranger. But no interest from DELWP or any state government department.

The Victorian National Parks Association has said¹⁰ : Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by subregion in Australia. Since European settlement there has been a progressive rate of native animal and plant extinctions with Victoria losing 18 mammal species, 2 birds, 1 snake, 3 freshwater fish, 6 invertebrates and 51 plants. Of the 3,330 known Victorian species, 49 are extinct and 2,097 (63%) are on the Threatened Species Advisory Lists.¹¹

There needs to be recovery programs for animals and plants that are becoming endangered prior to them being critically endangered. Citizen science projects and research through state governments and universities should be promoted and supported to assist in this work.

Final words on community education.

The lack of knowledge of the local community on their local wildlife is a significant factor. I am not surprised that many people have not heard of antechinus and don't know that we have native bush rats and bandicoots. This needs to be corrected with community education programs starting in schools and continued lifelong.

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GP, Stawell

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¹⁰ <https://vnpa.org.au/ecosystem-decline-inquiry/>

¹¹ <https://vnpa.org.au/ecosystem-decline-inquiry/>