

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria. **Please find my submission below where I outline my concern for the ongoing and accelerated ecosystem decline in Victoria.**

I am a PhD student in the Biodiversity Dynamics Research Group at the University of Melbourne. My research investigates the impact of multiple and interacting landscape processes on the persistence of plants in heathland ecosystems. In this lab I am accompanied by highly regarded academics and other research students in investigating the links between biodiversity and environmental change. As part of this research, we spend most of our time in Victorian ecosystems, investigating Victorian plants and animals and understanding, amongst other things, their risk of decline. I have the opportunity to learn about varied Victorian ecosystems from my peers in this lab, at the University, and in the wider research community. There are multiple interacting threats on Victorian ecosystems. Current and future climate change will accelerate existing threats, whilst posing new threats to these ecosystems

In addition to my professional life, I see the impacts of multiple threats on Victorian ecosystems as a member of the public. On my walks through urban ecosystems, walks through weed infested creeks, or on drives to country Victoria where I pass developments sprawling on to grassland ecosystems. I have volunteered as a supplementary feeder for the Helmeted Honeyeater supplementary feeding program for the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning for the last three years. In this program, I see the impact of ecosystem decline on a key threatened species, the Helmeted Honeyeater. Unable to survive without a great deal of human interference, Victoria's faunal emblem is at risk of extinction due to the legacy of land clearing, agricultural and urban expansion. This is of great cost, particularly for accounting for volunteer time. More must be done to stop ecosystem decline prior to threatened species reaching the precipice of extinction. Not only is this morally imperative, but it is sensible decision economically, and for human health and wellbeing, agricultural benefits, and much more. By protecting ecosystems, we can prevent the spread of zoonotic disease, such as Covid-19, for example.

Victoria's ecosystems continue to suffer an ongoing and accelerating decline as outlined in the Victorian State of the Environment report 2018.¹ Anthropogenic-induced climate change further threatens these ecosystems. Some of the other drivers that continue to threaten Victorian ecosystems are urbanization and urban sprawl, land clearing and logging, inappropriate fire regimes, and invasions of weeds and pests. According to the state of the environment report, the health of Victoria's environment is considered 'good' in just 11% of areas, and is going backwards in 30% of areas.

There are disproportionate declines of grassland ecosystems due to mismanagement and poor integration of ecosystem protection objectives into development. This includes Natural Temperate Grasslands and Grassy Eucalypt woodlands. The recent Victorian Auditor General's Office recent *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands* (June 2020)², demonstrated that the Victorian government has not met its responsibility in appropriately protecting Victorian grassland ecosystems. This includes a failure to acquire promised grassland reserves in these ecosystems. **Furthermore, old growth forests**

¹ 2018, The Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, State of the Environment 2018 Report

² 2020, Victoria Auditor-General's Office, 'Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands'
<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/20200617-Endangered-Grasslands-report.pdf>

are crucial resources that must be protected. It is impossible to restore the health of these ecosystems once degraded.

The Victorian Government has a legislated duty of care to protect and preserve Victoria's ecosystems, including the vegetation, animals and the biodiversity therein, under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, the *National Parks Act 1975*, *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*. **The Victorian government is failing to meet this legislated duty of care.**

The current strategic actions are inadequate in meeting obligations to protect Victorian ecosystems. Under the direction of this legislation, programs and projects that aim to protect Victoria's ecosystems are strategically directed through the *Protecting Victoria's Environment- Biodiversity 2037* ("Biodiversity 2037"). Under *Biodiversity 2037*, the Victorian government's objectives are to achieve an overall gain in the condition of Victoria's terrestrial, marine and waterway habitats. A key aim of Biodiversity 2037 is 'To ensure that Victoria's habitat is healthy (ensuring Victoria has flourishing plant and animal populations, improved habitats and functioning resilient ecosystems)'. Other relevant strategic documents include native vegetation clearing regulations *Guidelines for the Removal, Destruction or Lopping of Native Vegetation 2017*. **At this stage, current strategic mechanisms are failing to meet these duty of care requirements under the Victorian legislative framework, as mentioned above in the example of Grassland ecosystems.**

I propose the following recommendations to appropriately address ecosystem decline and facilitate ecosystem species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria in the context of climate change impacts.

- **Effective protection of Victorian ecosystems through better Integration of strategic frameworks across state government departments, local governments and cross-agencies.** A lack of inclusion of and engagement with all delivery partners was emphasized as a clear risk to protecting ecosystems in the Victorian Auditor General Office's report *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands*. This should include:
 - Within DELWP, **embedding these strategic values into planning and development** in a more rigorous way. Particularly in peri-urban areas.
 - **Providing more support for Local Governments** to embed information and advice into their work, particularly in the enforcement of the removal destruction or lopping of native vegetation in peri-urban areas.
 - Ensuring that strategic directions are **embedded across agencies and departments**. For example, Agriculture Victoria, VicForests, Parks Victoria.
 - **Better engagement with strategic partners** such as non-for-profits
- **Continued application of Monitoring and Evaluation such as the Biodiversity Monitoring and Evaluation Framework** will assist in quantifying true ecosystem decline and the impacts of government programs in addressing ecosystem decline. This should include:
 - Independent evaluation assessments
 - Scientific-based targets and monitoring based processes
 - Public reporting on progress
- **Future-proof Victorian ecosystems by considering climate change impacts in land management efforts. Including:**

- **Develop a funding pool** for climate change related research and management in these areas
- **Use localized climate change projections** to develop appropriate management strategies for specific ecosystems.
- **Develop strategies for at risk ecosystem and species** threatened by climate change processes.
- **Uptake of the Victorian Auditor General’s Office recommendations from the *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands* report and undertake an assessment of how these recommendations** can be applied to the protection of other Victorian ecosystems. Notably:
 - Up-to-date condition assessments
 - Improvement of landholder communication
 - Strengthening of governance arrangements
 - Victorian Government must purchase the required area of grassland and woodland reserves outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment plan by December 2021 and fully restore these within the next two years.
- **Review and strengthening of the *Guidelines for the Removal, Destruction or Lopping of Native Vegetation 2017***
- **As per *Biodiversity 2037*, strategies should frame long-term targets past 1-2-year funding cycles** and four-year political cycles, to guarantee some certainty in goals.
- Under the direction of long-term strategies, where possible, **run integrated ecosystem-based programs rather than siloed programs**. For example. rather than a pest eradication program and a weed eradication program, run a pests and weeds program together.
- **Leverage partnerships and funding resources** from programs with similar goals. E.g. if there is a roadside emergency management project, collaborate to make a targeted roadside weeds project in tandem.
- **Consider job creation initiatives** in ecosystem restoration or protection for in areas where there is high unemployment and ongoing resistance to phasing out land clearing or old-growth logging.
- Ecosystem protection programs **should prioritize Indigenous-led and co-produced initiatives**. This should follow best-practice guidelines from *Our knowledge our way in caring for country: Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening our knowledge for land and sea management*.³
- **Purchase back land for public ownership** and restoration in key ecosystems

Thank you for considering my submission into the inquiry for ecosystem decline in Victoria. I look forward to the actions taken by the Victorian government to protect our Victorian ecosystems, to ensure that future Victorians can enjoy these ecosystems into the future.

Kind regards,

Ella Plumanns Pouton

³ CSIRO 2020, ‘Our knowledge our way in caring for country: Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening our knowledge for land and sea management’, Emma Woodward, Rosemary Hil, Pia Harkness, and Ricky Archer (eds) <https://www.nespnorthern.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Our-Knowledge-Our-Way-Guidelines.pdf>