

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline

To: Mr Michael Baker – Committee Secretariat

Date: 7 November 2020

Subject: Victorian Parliament Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline

Dear Mr Baker

I would like to submit the following submission for the Victorian Parliaments Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline as I understand the timing of this inquiry has been extended.

Australia has nearly 152 million hectares of National Parks and reserves which equals around 19% of our land mass¹. With respect to forests Australia has 46 million hectares in National Parks and reserves specifically designed to protect biodiversity which represents 35% of our total forest area².

Despite this significant area of conservation reserves (in total about the size of South Australia) Australia has more than 1700 threatened species³

The main threats to species according to Australia's State of the Environment Report is introduced pest plants and animals, bushfire and habitat loss due to clearing for urban areas and agriculture.

The area of reserves is clearly not the limiting factor and so creating more reserves is unlikely to either significantly reduce the number of threatened species or halt ecosystem decline.

Blaming harvesting of natural forests for species loss is also incorrect and would be a distraction for your Inquiry as there is no evidence to support this claim⁴.

In my professional opinion we are not managing well our threatened species within our Parks and reserves. The following table provides a clear indication of this problem. The table below was produced by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (Established under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999) to provide Conservation Advice to the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment – 5th of May 2016 on the conservation of *Isodon obesulus obesulus* – the Southern Brown Bandicoot.

This table clearly shows both a massive decline and complete wipe out of Southern Brown Bandicoots in a range of reserves in New South Wales and Victoria. (Note - extirpated means completely wiped out!!)

Population	State	Decline
Ben Boyd National Park	NSW	44% (1999 to 2008)
Nadgee Nature Reserve	NSW	47% (1999 to 2008)
Port Campbell	Vic	>70% (past 10 years)
Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve	Vic	100% (extirpated around 2006)
Mt Lofty Ranges – northern metapopulation	SA	100% (extirpated around 2009)

These reserves have been dedicated for many years and it would appear that no one was monitoring the populations of the Southern Brown Bandicoot.

¹ <https://www.environment.gov.au/land/nrs/science/protected-area-locations>

² Australia's State of the Forest Report 2018 – Executive Summary (p5)

³ <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species#:~:text=Australia's%20biodiversity%20is%20currently%20in,and%20at%20risk%20of%20extinction.>

⁴ https://www.forestry.org.au/Forestry/News/IFA_News/MEDIA_RELEASE_Forest_management_does_not_cause_extinction.aspx?WebsiteKey=02f63147-9c3e-4351-bf7a-4bfd722e65cd

Monitoring species health and population dynamics should be a key performance indicator for all reserve managers.

Calls for tougher environmental regulations are not the solution either as the Forward from the 2014 Review of Biodiversity Legislation in NSW states as follows:

“We are not aware of anywhere in the world where long-term conservation of historical, cultural or biophysical resources has been successfully achieved solely through exerting the coercive powers of government. Educational, suasive and incentive measures are invariably an important part of successful regimes – we believe that these mechanisms should be used more in NSW. Without such measures, there is a strong probability of perverse outcomes”⁵.

There appears to be no formal quantitative reporting of threatened species status in the current Parks Victoria Annual Report.

It is also important to remember that the Australian landscape evolved with a degree of periodic disturbance, mostly fire but other factors like storms create biodiversity opportunities and possibly even hotspots due to edge effects. However our forests were never meant to burn as hard or as hot as they did last summer and many of these fires started in National Parks.

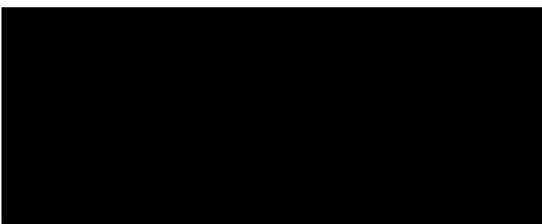
As a professional forester and long term conservationist I believe more reporting on the status of threatened species in our National Parks and reserves would ensure that the disaster that occurred to the Southern Brown Bandicoot in a number of Victorian and NSW reserves never happens again!

To achieve this, I would recommend two things:

1. That all National Parks and Reserves be certified under a recognised system such as the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification or PEFC which would mean that managers of conservation forests are held accountable for threatened species protection as a key performance measure. Ensuring that all forests are certified was a Recommendation (no 15) of the Forest Industry Advisory Council report to the Australian Government in June 2016⁶
2. That the Victorian Government investigate incentives for private landholders to undertake conservation measures as conservation starts at everyone’s doorstep and we need to ensure it occurs across the landscape and creating incentives rather than regulations is more likely to reverse the current ecosystem decline.

I would be more than happy to expand on any of my comments in this submission and appear personally at the Inquiry if that is appropriate.

Yours faithfully



Rob de Fégely AM BSc (Forestry), MSc, FAICD.

Director

⁵ A Review of Biodiversity Legislation in NSW Independent Panel – Dr N Bryon, Dr W Craik AM, Dr J Keniry AM, Prof H Possingham.- 18 Dec 2014.

⁶ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/forestry/industries/fiac#fiac-paper>