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To: ecosystems
Subject: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Categories: Submissions

30 August 2020

The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Committee Members,

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline and loss of biodiversity in Victoria.

My family and I are campers and bushwalkers in many of Victoria's beautiful places including Wilsons Prom, the Otways, Western Victoria and the Howqa River area, which we highly value.

I am extremely concerned about the declining health of Victoria's natural environment.

In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of Victoria's environment. The findings released in 2019 disclose a rapid and alarming decline in the health of Victoria's natural environment – yet no action plan or response from the Government has yet been produced. We cannot stand idle and unresponsive any longer. Instead, we need to take urgent action to restore our environment to good health.

Drivers of Decline in Victoria's Environment

There are several key drivers of the decline in Victoria's ecosystems, wildlife and biodiversity. The main drivers together with a brief action plan, are as follows:

1. Land clearing and deforestation

Logging and clearing of native forests and other vegetation over many years has destroyed huge swathes of habitat and with it all the animals, plants, birds and a vast range of floral and faunal species. This is the singular most important issue to be acted upon to arrest the decline in the natural environment. Victoria must immediately transition out of native forest logging and to exit existing Regional Forest Agreements with the Commonwealth. The Federal Court has recently found that logging continues in Victoria by the State owned Vicforests illegally – ie; in breach of current national laws and regulations. I urge you to bring your collective full weight to bear and recommend to the government to bring forward to January 2021 existing plans to finally end native logging in Victoria and to fund forest and timber workers into transition programs toward the plantation timber industry or other industries where appropriate.

2. Climate change

The impact of increasing temperatures through global warming is having a profound impact on our planet including in Victoria. It is causing more frequent and longer droughts and consequentially more devastating bushfires as we have seen in the last 2 years. The result of course is the devastation of native habitat across millions of hectares of forest killing an estimated one billion creatures. Victoria must urgently stop burning fossil fuels that is the main cause of global warming (ie; coal, oil and gas) and replace these energy sources with renewable sources.

3. Invasive species

Introduced plants and animals have a very significant impact on the environment and native flora in particular. Government needs to act quickly and decisively to implement programs to eradicate introduced plants and animals and to fund widespread programs to restore habitat as best we can particularly in areas that are adjacent to existing high ecological value areas.

4. Lack of pro-active planning by Government

As well as programs to remove introduced species, I urge you to consider pro-active programs to restore and support threatened species in their natural habitats – to plan and fund active conservation of species. Variations on this theme (adopted by some conservation groups) would be partnering with private ownership for land and species conservation - eg; the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

5. Lack of effective State laws to protect the environment, species and ecosystems

The main State laws for the protection of species and habitat in Victoria is the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (Act)*. However, as the Commissioner's 2018 report found, the state of Victoria's environment has deteriorated which clearly shows that the Act is failing Victorians. The reason for this is that the Act lacks teeth to operate independently of government policy or interests. The powers in the Act to protect the environment against development is subject to Ministerial discretion. I submit that the Act needs to be comprehensively reformed to at least remove ministerial discretion to intervene and amend the Act be more prescriptive on the action the Minister must take to protect the environment or to refer matters to an independent panel of experts for review and recommendation.

These threats to our environment remain real during the pandemic and must be addressed as another urgent priority before it is too late and we lose this opportunity to repair and restore our natural environment and biodiversity and save and protect for future generations, the unique flora and fauna of Victoria.

I look forward to seeing strong action to protect and restore Victoria's environment as a result of the work of your committee.

Yours sincerely,

Nina Killham

