

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria – August 2020

Dear Environment and Planning Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to your very important review.

As you know, the government's Protecting Victoria's Environment Biodiversity 2037 report says

“Victoria has seen a continuing legacy of biodiversity loss over almost two centuries. Future generations have been denied the opportunity to see 18 species of mammal, two birds, one snake, three freshwater fish, six invertebrates and 51 plants that have become extinct since European settlement. Today, between one quarter and one third of all of Victoria's terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals, along with numerous invertebrates and ecological communities, are considered threatened with extinction.”

To change this we need to guarantee not just sufficient but abundant safe and environmentally sound habitats. That means healthy vegetation, clean air, good soils, clean waterways, healthy oceans.

Forest protection

As I'm sure the committee will be told often during this inquiry, Victoria is Australia's most cleared state.

Recently the Victorian Government announced that logging of native forests would end by 2030. Good. But 10 years is simply too long to wait. And how do you stop wholesale clearing in the next five to 10 years as logging companies rush to beat the deadline? If this happens, there will be nothing left to protect.

The government must:

- immediately implement detailed time lines for protecting forests and move to plantation only harvesting
- add new reserves and identify gaps in the areas of forest protection eg. the Central Highlands
- urgently develop a clear, unambiguous definition of what constitutes old growth – no dodgy computer modelling. That system is flawed and destroys protected trees (see link below)
- stop subsidising VicForests so that they can [break the law](#) again
- stop subsidising failing logging companies to keep cutting down native forests. Use that money to prepare the industry and workers for opportunities in environmentally sound industries (like solar power)
- stop salvage harvesting
- prevent habitat fragmentation by developing better, stronger native vegetation laws

No salvage harvesting

The most recent, devastating fires burnt out more than 1.4 million hectares in our state. The scale is hard to appreciate. It's heartbreaking to think of the losses. Salvage harvesting will make things even worse.

Dead trees, both standing and fallen, provide important habitat for wildlife (eg. hollows), contribute significant organic matter to the soil, and promote wood-boring insects which are a post-fire food source for other animals. Clusters of burned, fallen trees also protect young, regenerating seedlings.

Salvage harvesting subjects already damaged forests to yet more trauma. Trucks, chainsaws, scrapers and boots compact and disturb soils and surviving vegetation.

Claims that salvage logging assists with fuel reduction are contrary to studies which show it can actually increase bushfire risk, because the salvage logging slash increases fine surface fuels on the ground.

Even in areas unaffected by fire, salvage harvesting robs forests of the important contribution that fallen and dead trees make for both soil regeneration and species survival.

Stop habitat fragmentation

Many of our remaining natural areas, especially in western and central Victoria, are now in isolated fragments of vegetation often in rugged terrain and sandy soils – areas that are not optimum for agriculture.

Isolated populations of birds, insects and animals can't thrive because of limited food sources. They are vulnerable to foxes and wild cats.

These isolated areas are often not vigorous or diverse. This makes them vulnerable to weed invasions, fires and even the mildest effects of climate change.

The government must:

- introduce stronger native vegetation protection laws
- fund effective landcare programs
- begin major tree and vegetation planting
- help private property owners to set aside areas of land free from grazing and crops
- purchase strategic parcels of land that can connect and extend native habitat
- encourage and implement weed removal and control regimes on private and public lands

More national parks

The [Victorian National Parks Association](#) says a further 3.1 million hectares of public and private land needs permanent protection. That is without taking into account the needs of specific threatened

species, climate change, or fire impacts. Even the environment department acknowledges that we need more national parks. Its [biodiversity strategy](#) says 2.1 million hectares is required.

Water quality - marine

Victoria's Environmental Assessment Council says

“Seawater is used for industrial purposes including cooling during energy generation, aquaculture and desalination. Treated sewage effluent and industrial wastewater is discharged through outfalls. With population growth the volume of seawater extracted and wastewater discharged will increase, extending the area of impact. Climate change will increase the number of intense rainfall events and volume of stormwater... sediments and pollutants (runoff) threatens biodiversity”

Our oceans give us food and oxygen in abundance. We give back in abundance – sewage, toxic chemicals, rubbish and contaminants. How is that sustainable?

The government must:

- respect Ramsar wetland protections and stop developments like AGL's proposed liquefied natural gas facility in Westernport Bay. This [facility is unacceptable](#) AGL admits the plant will discharge 47 kilograms of chlorine per day – this is shocking
- increase protected areas - only 5.3% of our waters are covered in no-take areas – the lowest of any Australian state, well below international benchmarks
- better police dumping and chemical runoff into our oceans
- extend coastal reserves 200m offshore

Water quality - fresh

The river corridor has been identified by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) as the key to conservation connectivity for wildlife corridors and bio-links.

Freshwater dependent ecosystems are grossly under-represented in the national system of ecological reserves. Only about 3 per cent of wetlands are within the land reserve systems. Many are too small to cope with the impacts of poor land management.

The government must:

- ensure rivers have a guaranteed share of their own water, a 'sustainable base flow' that is secure under all conditions
- bring all crown river frontages under conservation management
- encourage farmers to better manage stock movements on an around river banks
- slow and capture stormwater runoff to increase water availability and reduce damage to urban creeks and rivers
- improve rates of water recycling in urban areas
- ensure business (esp the mining sector) sets and meets targets for more efficient water use

Renewable energy

As the science tells us, the last four years were the four hottest on record. Climate change is a direct cause of soil degradation. Climate change limits the availability and quality of water for drinking and agriculture. Glaciers and ice sheets in polar and mountain regions are already melting faster than ever, causing sea levels to rise.

If we don't slow global emissions, temperatures could rise above 3 degrees by 2100 causing irreversible damage to our ecosystems.

Forget species diversity, without action on climate change we are talking about species extermination.

The government must:

- accelerate the phasing out of coal-fired power plants
- increase emission controls and improve air quality standards on coal-fired power plants until they are closed
- build publicly owned renewable energy plants
- encourage investment in battery storage technologies
- improve long term incentives for businesses and private residents to install solar
- mandate private sector spending to upgrade and modernise the transmission network to allow better capture and distribution of renewable power

In conclusion

It is possible to improve the health of our ecosystem and protect our threatened flora and fauna.

And it is possible at the same time to [increase job numbers](#) and give people secure work in clean, sustainable industries.

Survival of all species depends on a sustainable healthy environment. The evidence is overwhelming. The time is now.

So please take the forester's view (the long term vision) in your deliberations. And please act on the oft quoted saying "when is the best time to plant a tree – 20 years ago – when is the second best time – now".

I would like to wish the committee well in its endeavours.

Yours sincerely

Debra McCoy



Information sources

<https://vnpa.org.au/an-end-to-logging-of-victorias-native-forests/>

<https://vnpa.org.au/forgotten-forests/>

<https://vnpa.org.au/caring-for-parks-by-the-numbers/>

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https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/51259/Protecting-Victorias-Environment-Biodiversity-2037.pdf

<http://veac.vic.gov.au/documents/VEAC%20Marine%20Environment%20SUMMARY%20DOC.pdf>

<https://environmentvictoria.org.au/our-campaigns/healthy-rivers/about-healthy-rivers/solution-healthy-rivers/>

<https://www.un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win>

https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Climate-Council_AlphaBeta-Clean-Jobs-Plan-200720.pdf