

Submission to the Victorian Legislative Council Enquiry into the Decline in Species and Ecosystems. August 2020

The Victorian Government is to be congratulated for instigating this enquiry and I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to it.

(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;

Habitat destruction, modification or interference is recognised as the main contributing factor in species declines.

For too long Government Environmental agencies have had to limit their focus to addressing endangered species, whereas greater ecological consideration at an earlier stage to prevent species declining to an endangered level would be a preferred option. *A stitch in time saves nine.*

- **Protection of habitat protects species.**

- **Cease logging in native forests** preferably sooner than 2030.
- **Change Prescribed Burning programs** to more targeted burning. Quality and not quantity of hazard reduction. That is, rather than burn great swathes of forest each year, burn smaller targeted areas. (Refer to Professor Lindemeyer's recommendations <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFNRj0leT8o&feature=youtu.be>). Early detection and robust response to fire outbreaks. Seek alternatives to burning eg slashing which allows the diversity of plants, insects, fungi, microbes to persist. Burning promotes fire tolerant species to the detriment of other plants and changes the ecology of an area. It also allows alien plant species to become established.
- **Prescribed Burning impacts wildlife!** Not only are many animals cooked, burnt, maimed, terrified, and those that manage to survive are displaced having had their habitat and food sources destroyed or severely impacted. This makes them vulnerable to starvation, disease, weakness and predation. Not only are their numbers depleted this interference in their habitat impacts their breeding ability and success rates. This is a flagrant flouting of the Animal Welfare Laws of which there are several which state that it is an offence to disturb, injure or kill wildlife. Whilst it is heart-rending to see the effects of wildfire on humans and the environment, prescribed burning subjects wildlife to this onslaught **every** year.
In practice it has been shown that prescribed burning does not offer the expected bushfire protection in spite of the computer modelling to the contrary. The annual incremental losses, changes to eco-systems, the pain, suffering, displacement of wildlife is a huge price to pay, and in my view a significant driver of biodiversity decline.
- **Limit urban sprawl** encroaching on bushland habitat. This is another cause of incremental loss of habitat The introduction of domestic pets especially cats and dogs pose a significant threat to wildlife as does road traffic, noise, light and activity in general. Some new suburbs in Canberra are 'cat-free' suburbs and this could be implemented in the outer suburbs of Victorian cities and towns. People wanting to live in these suburbs are made aware of this criteria. (Street signs have a symbol of a cat with a red line across it so everyone has to be aware of the ruling.) In the existing suburbs cats should be microchipped, desexed, and confined within structures that allow it freedom within the boundaries of its owner's property but not be able to venture further afield. I recognise these suggestions fall under the jurisdiction of local government but given the plight of our wildlife I believe there is a role for the State Government to intervene or at least encourage and support local governments to enact and enforce environmental and wildlife protection measures.

- **Recognise the significance of local species decline.** Whilst a species may be numerous in other parts of the state, the local decline or loss of a species depletes the biodiversity of that region.
 - In western Victoria the numbers of **Spotted Quail-thrush** and **Chestnut-rumped Heath-wren** have declined. These and other ground-dwelling fauna have been greatly impacted by the prescribed burning regimes and should be given greater consideration by forest managers. It only takes a catastrophe in another strong-hold for that species to become vulnerable or indeed endangered. By ensuring disjunctive populations remain intact the species has a chance of escaping the endangered species list and future expensive recovery programs.
 - In 1983 there was a colony of 100 **Little Penguins** in the Portland area they have all but disappeared with the occasional lone penguin visiting the Portland Harbour. They have disappeared from a previous stronghold at Cape Northumberland in South Australia and their numbers are declining rapidly in the Warrnambool area. This incremental decline should be addressed before it is too late, and expensive recovery programs are required. All it would take is for disease or other catastrophe to befall the iconic Phillip Island population and the fallout could be dire for the survival of the species as well as the lucrative ecotourism trade.
 - 1994 was the last recording of a **Hooded Robin** in the Portland area and the **Jacky Winter** is heading in the same downward trajectory.

There are many other species where the numbers have declined in this region which is primarily due to land management practices,

- clearing of native vegetation
- broadscale use of insecticides as part of farming practices
- repeated burning of native forests alters the availability of grasses, seeds, soil micro flora and fauna, and invertebrates which are required to sustain the biodiversity that once thrived in these environments.
- Given the number of recreational fishers that descend on Portland one cannot help but wonder if the amount of fish being taken is contributing to the decline in Little Penguin numbers. Loss of safe nesting sites and therefore depletion in breeding success would be another contributing factor in their decline.

(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;

I believe there is a need for an independent body to oversee the existing legislation compliance. I also believe the non-compliance penalties to be inadequate especially when considered against the cost of policing these laws.

Significant monetary fines, confiscation of vehicles and/or equipment commensurate to the damage caused to the environment and the cost of restoration. The court system should be a last resort and the legal costs awarded against the guilty.

(The Covid-19 experience has shown us that some people need to have meaningful disincentives such as significant fines before they comply with the law.)

- **Vehicles on beaches.** This has become a massive problem where I live in South West Victoria and I am sure other regions are also being impacted by the destructiveness of vehicles on beaches. Parks Victoria seem to be unable to police these activities and still carry out their other responsibilities.

- There is an urgent need for a **public awareness campaign** of the content of the environmental legislation. Start with vehicles on beaches and explain why it is so destructive. Not only are the birds' nesting disrupted or destroyed, many of them shelter in the wheel ruts in the sand only to be run over by the next vehicle. The compaction and squeezing the moisture out of the sand and crushes the minute invertebrates, which are so necessary for birds and crustaceans to survive. Many of our beach birds are migratory and have flown thousands of kilometres from the Northern Hemisphere to feed here. They need as much food as they can get for them to be able to power their way back to their breeding grounds. Constant disturbance by people, vehicles, dogs and horses prevent them from gaining sufficient weight for their long journey northward. The decline in migratory bird populations is well documented world-wide and Victoria has a significant part to play in addressing this decline. These incredible little birds deserve greater consideration and respect than being harassed by thoughtless drivers and beach-goers. They deserve **protection!**
- **Ban advertising that depicts vehicles on beaches** as a way of 'living the dream'. It creates a night-mare for our beach inhabitants.
- **Stop urbanisation of coastal environments** Whilst I acknowledge this is a local government issue, the broader impact of coastal 'development' is global and local governments need to be coerced into protecting these fragile ecosystems through State legislation. People already living in coastal environments have shown complete disregard of the regulations pertaining to the clearing native dune vegetation. Local drone footage clearly shows these cleared 'tracks' to the beach and they are more than just walking tracks! These 'tracks' damage the integrity of the dunes making them susceptible to erosion and provide easy access to beach-nesting birds for predators such as foxes, cats and dogs. Hooded Dotterel (Plover) numbers have declined and breeding success is intermittent at best. Red-capped Plovers used to be regulars on our local beach 40 years ago when I moved here but not seen locally for many years. This is an example of a species (although abundant elsewhere) whose numbers have declined locally.
- **Laws should apply to everyone, exemptions to the animal welfare legislation for a few people with blood lust to massacre our waterfowl is totally unacceptable.** I was appalled by the decision of the Victorian Government to allow a duck shooting season this year. Given the extended and severe drought in other parts of Australian which extended into Victoria, and that there had not been a duck shooting season for some years, surely it was timely for the Government to allow this barbaric relic from last century to fade into the history books. The Government has shown it has double standards when a farmer was prosecuted (rightly) over the slaughter of Wedge-tailed Eagles on one hand while on the other hand allows a few blood thirsty shooters to terrorise, maim and kill waterfowl that pose no threat to humans or the environment. To satisfy the urge to take another creatures life these people could be redirected to species that do pose a threat to the environment and wildlife such as goats, pigs, deer, foxes, rabbits, horses, and wild dogs.
- **Litter and Pollution** Aquatic and marine life is severely impacted by litter and pollution. Litter tracing programs are being undertaken by NGO's but what are the penalties? Barely a slap on the wrist if that. Court proceedings are costly so meaningful fines that cover the cost of policing the anti-littering laws may act as a deterrent or at least raise awareness that littering is socially unacceptable. *Clean up Australia* has made a difference, but still the litter keeps coming. I can only suggest a public awareness campaign depicting heart-rending footage of the effects of fishing-line, plastic bags, cans, plastics and nano-plastics etc on wildlife.

(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;

- **Landcare** program is crucial to protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems as far as it goes, however I believe there is a role for the Department of Primary Industries to promote better land and

livestock stewardship as part of the farmer's business plan. I believe there should be a mandated ratio of shelter to each paddock's acreage as part of livestock husbandry to reduce temperature stress (heat, cold and wind-chill). This would tie in with the landcare initiatives of endemic species shelter-belt planting thus providing habitat and corridors for wildlife across a broad landscape as well as increasing farm productivity.

- **Catchment Management Authorities** have also been beneficial and for the most part effective in protecting ecosystems. Locally the Glenelg Hopkins CMA has a difficult task in preventing the illegal artificial openings of the Surry River. In the past they have conducted many public meetings and educational sessions about the ecology of a healthy estuary and the scientific reasons behind the prohibition of interfering with the river estuary's natural function. However there are some in our community who refuse to acknowledge the science. CMA's play a vital role in protecting the landscape and waterways through monitoring, public education and assistance and working with volunteers to restore ecosystems.
- **Offsets.** It seems to me that there are significant loop-holes in the legislation regarding offsets. Surely if an individual or company destroys vegetation and habitat the offset should entail the replanting of a similar and diverse ecosystem or as close as possible to it. It is my understanding that a 'developer' can purchase existing bushland as claim it as an offset, with no net gain in biodiversity. There seems to be no compliance inspections as to the suitability of works undertaken or indeed if any all have been done
- **Victorian Gorse Taskforce** is a great initiative which needs to be expanded to include Italian Buckthorn which is invading road-sides and forests. I believe this needs specific targeting rather than the indiscriminate burning of large areas of forest. It also requires follow-up treatment to prevent recurrence. I understand invasive plant management is a huge undertaking which has not had sufficient attention in the past and is now one of the biggest problems we are facing.
- **Koala Issue.** In western Victoria the over-browsing by koalas of Manna Gums (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) and Peppermints (*Eucalyptus falciformis*) is having a profound effect on the availability of these species in particular to other fauna. Many trees are already dead and I foresee a collapse in the numbers of other species that utilise these trees such as the White-naped honeyeater. I am not advocating modifying the numbers of koalas, as the population here may prove to be vital in preventing this iconic species from becoming extinct elsewhere in Australia. My suggestion would be to incorporate the replacement of these trees under the landcare strategy suggested above as part of the stock shelter initiative. I also suggest some research into companion planting of native plants close to the Eucalypts that would provide a disincentive for a koala to access them. I have observed in my own garden where a *E.leucoxylon* is surrounded by a thicket of dense stems and branches and although the koalas have been keen to access this tree in the past they are rarely seen in it nowadays.

(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;

- **Coastal dune protection.** We are already witnessing the erosion along the coast near Portland therefore it becomes imperative that the integrity of the dune system is protected. Unlawful clearing of dune vegetation by adjacent landholders should be policed and offenders made to rehabilitate the dune or pay a significant fine to cover the cost of rehabilitation. These 'tracks' pose a real threat to the low-lying areas behind the fore-dune. The clearing of dune vegetation gives rise to erosion by wind and rain and will very likely provide a conduit for the sea to penetrate further inland than it would if the dune integrity was maintained. Therefore my suggestion would be to prevent the erection of dwellings on or in the fore-dune to reduce the temptation to interfere with the dune system. We have already witnessed the results of ill-advised coastal 'development' in NSW.

- **Protection of Waterways.** Environmental flows should take precedence in determining water usage from rivers. The environmental impact on the Murray-Darling Basin from mis-management or illegal water extraction has been disastrous and should not be repeated. This is a complex issue but I believe the environment should be at the forefront of the decision-making process, as the effects of altered rainfall patterns associated with climate change impact catchments.
- **Carbon Credits.** Companies that have a large carbon footprint should have an obligation to 'purchase' carbon credits in the form of timber plantations on already cleared land to meet the demand for timber products as the logging in native forests ceases. This may already occur on a voluntary basis.
- Victoria is to be commended for setting a **Renewable Energy Target** and working towards achieving it. However there are many avenues to explore outside wind and solar energy generation and storage. In the western part of Victoria lies the largest volcanic plateau in the world with identified hotspots from thermal imaging. Portland has had geothermal heating of public buildings in the past, but the maintenance costs compared to other cheaper sources of fuel ended this. I believe Victoria should be moving away from **gas extraction** as this is still a **fossil fuel** and not renewable.

(e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria;

- I believe there is the possibility of engaging First People in a more labour intensive prescribed burning program similar to how the landscape was managed prior to European settlement. This could be a starting point to reconnect First People with their country and historical land management practices.
- Given the significant threat to our environment of invasive alien plant species and the need for targeted control measures this could also provide employment opportunities for indigenous people to engage with and protect their country.
- Revegetation works are also often labour intensive often carried out by volunteers. If these volunteers could be supplemented with First People working parties it would provide an opportunity for both parties to engage with each other and foster mutual respect and understanding.

(f) any other related matters.

Waste Management

Our natural environment is impacted by the vast quantities of waste generated by our way of life.

- Victorians have shown themselves to be keen recyclers but where does the recycled matter end up. This issue has been aired in some very good programs aired on ABC TV which has raised awareness of the enormity of this problem. The Government could be encouraging the expansion of the **composting industry**, and sponsoring research into waste as a **source of energy** by way of **pyrolysis** or other technologies, as well as **building and road-making material**. Subsidising the production of articles and equipment made from recycled plastics to make them more affordable and to help 'grow' the industry.
- Continue to address the issue of packaging, particularly plastic, polystyrene.
- The more recently identified issue of nano-particles and synthetic fibres entering waterways and oceans is also of concern. Research is needed to address this.

Water Resources

- Water is a precious resource and the State Government is to be commended for building the Desalination Plant, however I believe the recycling of water to be a further option that should be explored and instigated. Clean water harvesting off the many roof-tops across our cities. (This is the main household water source for many rural people.)