

Mary Connor

  
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## **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;**

I grew up in remote East Gippsland and spent the majority of my working life there. I am an experienced farmer, a retired nurse and have a Bachelor of Applied Science.

I have been observing and trying to get action on the environmental disasters unfolding before me. I have managed our farm just above Lake Wellington in an environmentally sensitive way and in recent years have turned to a plant-based diet as I have an ongoing concern about the impact of agricultural animals on Ecosystem decline.

In this submission I concentrate on specific concerns in areas I know and love in Gippsland. However I know similar scenarios are playing out Australia wide and have included a short summary of observations and concerns about Kakadu.

### **Decline of the Gippsland Lakes ecosystem**

The once mainly fresh estuarine RAMSAR Lakes are now saline.  
The salinity is the result of:

- Artificial opening of the entrance at the town of Lakes Entrance and then subsequent deeper dredging over the last decade. This has caused increased currents, scouring and salt intrusion right to the western end of the lakes system, even affecting the banks of lake Wellington.
- Reduced river flow into the Lakes system. Extraction for agriculture, industry and damming for towns and city of Melbourne water requirements combined with frequent drought and bushfires in the catchments have all contributed. Climate change has exacerbated these factors.
- The combined effect of human activity has caused plants within the lakes and shores to decline with severe erosion. Aquatic life is declining.
- Fragmentation of managing bodies leads to inadequate monitoring and conservation efforts. Some of these fragmented custodians are Gippsland ports, East Gippsland shire, Wellington shire, Various DELWP departments including the CMA, East Gippsland CMA, West Gippsland CMA to name some. This results in lack of coordination, communication and circular buck passing.
- For example there is Macalister irrigation district run by Southern Rural Water. it Operates under DELWP but it is governed by a board of directors, who are appointed

by the minister for water. Their operations have a significant impact on water flows in Macalister/Thomson /Latrobe river Which run in to Lake Wellington.

- In the Latrobe river there is minimal monitoring of nutrient, hormone disrupting chemicals and heavy metals or saline intrusion up the river from the lake.
- Water saving upgrades of the infrastructure have been followed by the creation of more water rights instead of using the saved water for environmental flows. Recently local government has endorsed extension of the Macalister irrigation district. The Macalister/Thomson /Latrobe river systems are already over drawn! The Hazelwood coal mine stabilisation by filling with water from the Latrobe River will aggravate this further. There are too many demands for the water!
- The water Quality and availability from the Tambo River is likely to be impacted upon by the reopening of the Benambra mine. Despite an already leaking tailings dam there are plans to restart mining using the same dam but with increased capacity. The guidelines are that the tailings have to be contained for ever!
- The proposed Kalbar mineral sands mine in Glenaladale will degrade the Mitchel river and its associated vegetable growing area.

## **The impact on people.**

Gunnaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) are losing their heritage. Ancient burial grounds on Boole Poole Peninsula which Russel Mullet and team from GLaWAC are endeavouring to save from erosion.

The importance of healthy estuaries as places of economic production and social use being threatened by a range of pressures that will make them less sustainable; the complex eco-hydrological processes that operate for a diverse range of estuary types that require better understanding of dynamics and how those dynamics are influenced by variability in freshwater flows;

## **Impact on fauna and Flora**

Deeper dredging of the entrance over the past decade, allows salt intrusion and increased tidal currents. Any vegetation not adapted to salt has declined around the lake shores. This includes aquatic grasses, reed beds and fringing scrub and trees. Increased salinity has caused loss of underwater vegetation on the shallow lake floor, which would in the past, have decreased wave action.

Loss of the integrity of this hugely important RAMSAR lakes ecosystem will have far spread impact on migratory birds and other species.

## **Suggested actions to improve the Gippsland Lakes Ecosystem**

### Monitoring

There is a need to develop standards for effective monitoring of critical indicators that inform communities and decision makers on need for action before certain tipping points are

reached. Along with improved governance and interdepartmental cooperation in estuary management.

- Establish and fund long-term Ramsar site management for monitoring and reporting programs to protect our international migratory birds and other species as per our international commitments. The current RAMSAR reporting of the Gippsland Lakes does not reflect their true condition. This is partly due to lack of monitoring.
- Limiting the extent and depth of dredging to manage the lakes with a shallower entrance. (Unfortunately it may be impossible to restore the entrance to its natural state of intermittent opening) To reduce dredging depth clarification is needed on relevant dredging and dumping renewal decisions and how this sits with *Marine and Coastal Act* and *EPBC Act* respectively.
- Long term monitoring and transparent reporting of the depth, currents and salinity across the lakes as well as monitoring vegetation changes and erosion, nutrient and pollutants and freshwater flows of the feeding rivers need urgent attention. This could include vegetation on the lakes floor which in the past played a role in reducing erosion from wave action. Overall body for monitoring and planning to balance the competing for the lakes and its catchment.
- Engineering solutions could be revisited. This includes a barrage or lock system on one or more of the channels allowing a fresher water window over the top.
- The lakes need an independent watchdog with NO vested economic interests.

## **Deforestation in Australia and biodiversity loss.**

Deforestation is still Increasing.

90% of Australian clearing is for beef

Much of mature tree loss is not counted.

### **One example is extensive remote roadside clearing for supposedly safe fire access during bushfires and fuel reduction burns.**

In East Gippsland residents have been distressed by tens of thousands of ancient trees being felled in preparation for fuel reduction burns. The forest has been so dry that the fuel reduction burns have been as damaging as bushfires.

I have observed fire getting into hollow trees which results in the trees falling and burning away. After the planned burn you can look through the forest and think there were never any large trees there; the fuel reduction has taken them out.

In preparation for these fuel reduction burns many large trees are cut down along bush tracks and around the perimeters.

DELWP has very few biodiversity staff and there is huge pressure on them from fire managers to facilitate burning and clearing. These losses, aren't documented in official figures but have a cumulative effect, contributing ecosystem loss and to climate crisis.

Thousands of km of roadside and huge tracts of land were cleared while roads were closed to the public during and for many weeks after the bushfires.

Under the state of emergency these activities were undertaken without public scrutiny. The CoVid 19 pandemic has added to the lack of scrutiny. Environmentalists are under lockdown whilst logging interests and DEWLP have unfettered access to forests.

Undocumented, variable sized tracts of tree removal all add up and are contributing to the degradation of our ecosystem. Fuel reduction burning is resulting in major loss of ecosystems.

There is a push for local knowledge to be utilised when planning fire management but this should be based on science rather than opinion or legend. An example is the Orbost CFA calling for everything that wasn't burnt in the bushfires to be fuel reduced, a knee jerk response driven by fear and trauma after the terrible 2019/2020 bushfire that devastated everything in its path, even those areas that had been subjected to fuel reduction burns. Huge amounts of East Gippsland were burnt in the bushfires this summer and whole ecosystems have been lost or changed forever.

## **Fire management at present not based on science**

### **Suggested action to reduce fire authorities contribution to loss of biodiversity.**

These burns should be based on the best available research. For example wet forests and long unburnt forests are more protective and resilient against fire if left undisturbed.

Independent biodiversity and fire experts be included in decisions of when and where fuel reduction burns should take place. FFM are burning more and more area which has proved ineffective and destroyed ecosystems.

More attention to prevention of ignition and early response while the fires are still small.

Forest timber harvesting continues despite being clearly demonstrated as being unsustainable and breaking federal environmental laws. Salvage Logging is also taking place in burnt forest despite it being shown to be the most destructive time to log ecosystems.

### **Local example of unsustainable logging**

One of many: The [REDACTED] is now being logged. This forest is between [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

This is part of the remaining 20% of East Gippsland forests that didn't burn this summer.

The 2019 Gov Forest Protection Survey Program surveys at this coupe recorded one of the rarest mammals around – the Long-footed Potoroo. The Long Footed Potaroo has been given a 40m buffer. Also recorded on site were Yellow Belly Gliders and Other possums, but not in enough numbers to trigger any action to protect them. No Powerful Owl nest was found and according to the plan, 'Harvesting Foresters are to look out for Powerful Owl nesting and roosting sites utilised recently.'

According to DELWP's Bushfire Emergency – Biodiversity response and recovery report (23 Jan 2020) the projected bushfire extent was estimated to destroy 97% of the Long-footed Potoroo's modelled habitat. That was before Cape Conran Coastal Park burned, destroying significant known Potoroo and bandicoot habitat.

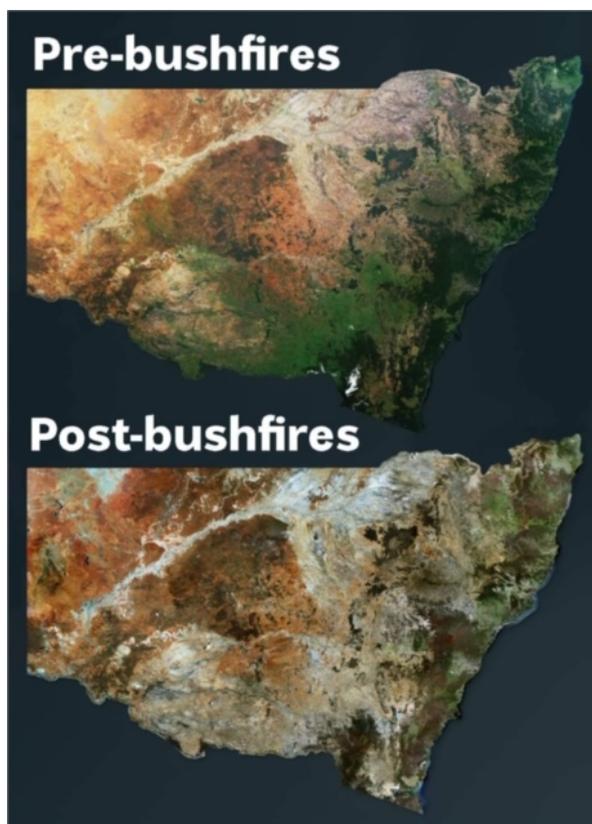
## **There is no time for transitioning out of native forest logging – it needs to end now.**

This should be the first priority for any environmental body to preserve mature ecosystems. The climate change mitigation effect is of great importance.

Most of us are unaware due to constraints imposed by virus restrictions.

After this heartbreaking photo I have included a letter to the local paper to illustrate the anguish of local people who are aware of this destruction of the final 3% of potoroo habitat.

This is not normal



Dear Editor,

One of the hidden casualties of last summer was the massive loss of ground dwelling mammals. Potoroo and Bandicoot, once aerated the soil across East Gippsland. 97% of their habitat was destroyed in the summer bushfires and Cape Conran Coastal Park burnout. Thankfully, a couple of kilometres away on the Cabbage Tree-Conran Rd is a dense patch of long-unburnt undergrowth supporting a complex of tunnels and predator-proof habitat.

The Long-footed Potoroo (*Potorous longipes*) inhabits forest with a dense understorey and feeds almost exclusively on the sporocarps of hypogeous fungi, and thus depends on habitat with a year-round supply of sporocarps. *Potorous longipes* was already in severe decline before the fires. A Recovery Plan was established in 2000 to conserve and enhance hypogeous fungi. These in-ground mushrooms only grow within two metres of adult trees. So you can guess what's happening to the Potoroo's food supply from logging. Those in the community who appreciate the place we live in and feel a responsibility to protect other species, are outraged at the deliberate felling of fungi-supporting forest adjacent to one of the last known colonies of Long-footed Potoroo. These unique mammals will most likely starve to death if not killed directly by the bulldozers.

We want jobs, we want life to continue as normal, but this is NOT normal. We are consciously and deliberately eliminating our environment. We haven't finished counting the losses and it's as though nothing happened.

Meanwhile Darren Chester's million dollar plan for bringing tourists to East Gippsland throws money at infrastructure, boardwalks and signage, so visitors can peek at pictures of the birds and animals that once used to live here.

State and Federal governments are spending billions on saving the economy from the Coronavirus. Surely they could bail out Vic Forests. Compensate workers well and support them to retrain in forest protection, before the sun sets completely on Australia's unique flora and fauna.

Yours,

## Power lines underground

Overhead Powerlines are known to be a fire risk and require clearing and maintenance. Many of Gippsland's power lines need upgrading to higher capacity to meet demand and to enable local residential and commercial solar and wind generation to feed into the grid. The upgrades provide an opportunity to develop an underground system which although more costly initially provides offsets in decreased costs of ongoing maintenance. Emphasis on renewable energy will help reduce the contribution of climate change to increasing bushfire risk.

## Urban Planners are allowing subdivisions on the rural/urban interface and even in forest.

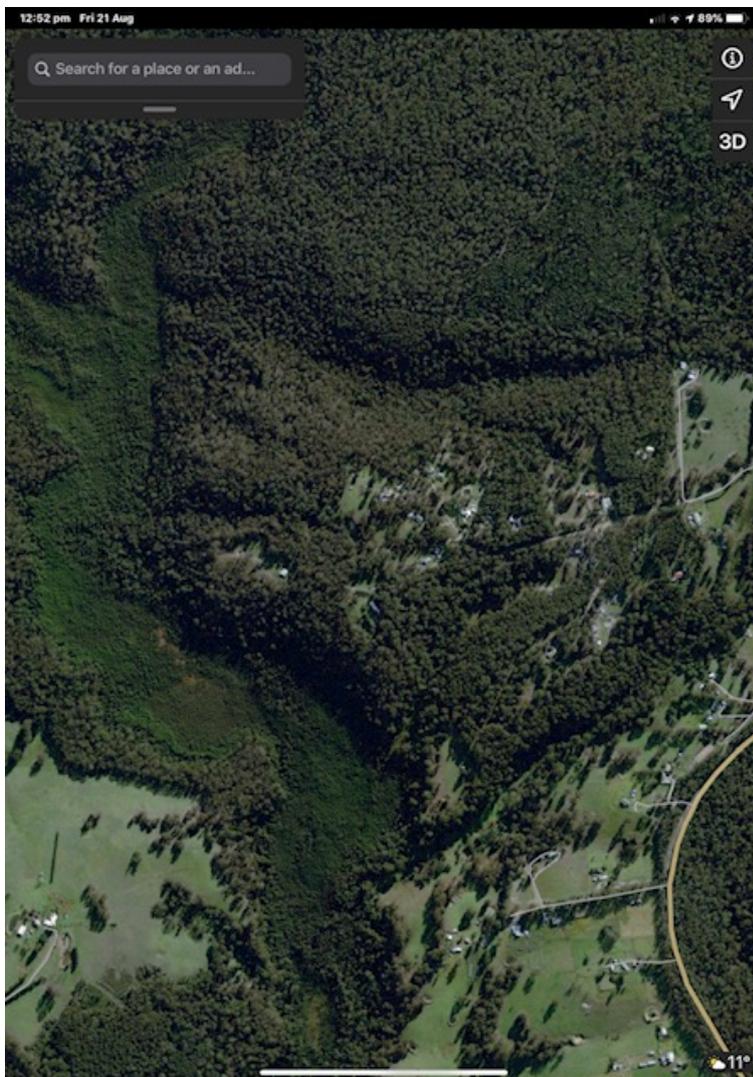
For example there are new building lots adjacent to the endangered Warm Temperate and Littoral rainforest along stony creek where it runs into Toorloo arm between Lakes Entrance and Nowa Nowa in East Gippsland.

The fire risk then leads to intensive clearing of the blocks.

Fear of bushfires now leads to these residents to call loudly for the clearing and burning of adjacent forest.

Fire breaks are pushed around the subdivision and intensive fuel reduction takes place.

Warm temperate rainforest cannot endure burning so these systems are changed and lost for ever.



## Feral animals, weeds

### Gun lobby brumby lovers

The gun lobby has enjoyed disproportionate power at the expense of the environment.

Locally in Clydebank 20 years ago, deer shooters planted native vegetation on reserves areas with the aim of providing habitat for deer. This was good for the wildlife, until Sambar deer appeared there, relocated from other areas to breed up with the aim of providing game to the shooters. These deer, especially the hog deer which have been present for many many years enjoy more protection than many of the native animals. Farmers can get a permit to shoot kangaroos and wombats but to shoot a hog deer you have to have a very special shooters license and a certain number of tags. If anyone is found with an untagged carcass the find is hefty. Sambar deer relocated to the area have caused havoc on vegetation and farm fencing. It is almost impossible to fence them out to exclude them from Landcare areas.

Duck shooting is now inappropriate given the farming and drainage of wetlands. Whilst duck shooting has been a traditional pastime it is no longer viable given the increasing number of shooters and diminishing natural habitat. It is a hangover from colonial times and there is no need to shoot ducks any more.

Local knowledge can offer much but the opinion of a local farmer should never override scientific research. Brumby lovers are an example of this, making claims that it is their heritage and that the “bush” has “adapted” and to eradicate Brumbies will cause fuel buildup and bushfires. Science clearly shows otherwise.

## Weeds

Weed plants are still being sold in nurseries. Yesterday I saw Vinca in Bunnings. This weed has choked many rivers. The worst I know of is the Tambo river. Much of the riparian area is filled with vinca to the exclusion of native vegetation.

## Plastics

### Marine environment

Australians who have not travelled in Asia do not realise the extent of the plastic pollution. Some years ago on a trip to remote Myanmar I was shocked to see people that barely used plastic surrounded by it. Plastics and micro plastics in our oceans, sands and in our food chain will cause health and reproductive problems far into the future. Plastics are hormone disrupters.

### Simple solution to plastic waste.

Australia should not import or use single use plastic packaging. CoVid 19 has shown that we can make far-reaching changes to our lifestyle. Why not start with plastic? Personally I have

reduced my plastic use by 90%. So many products are packaged in plastic it is impossible to avoid altogether. This is one of the reasons why I seldom consume dairy products.

## EPBC Act

The Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 commenced on 29 October 2019. The Minister for the Environment appointed Professor Graeme Samuel AC to conduct the Review.

The Morrison government this week introduced legislation to hand greater powers to the states that included no measures to maintain or strengthen protection for threatened species or ecosystems. The recent bill has not made explicit reference to the national environmental standards which was the centrepiece of the recommendations.

Martine Maron, from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists and also a member of the Samuel committee, said the bill contained nothing that responded to the key concerns of the review – that Australia's laws had failed to protect the environment.

## Solution

Federal EPBC 'cop' to assure the States are adhering to the terms of the EPBC and not putting their own spin on it as is happening in Victoria.

The Samuel's Review suggests this occurs but governments are dismissive.

## Livestock

Livestock have been shown to be a major contributor to climate change. Beef, dairy and sheep production consumption could be minimised and live export stopped all together.

Governments have not addressed this despite animal welfare and climate change concerns. I see Australia's agricultural future as supplying a healthy plant based diet.

Earlier I outlined the competing demands for limited water. Using copious irrigation to grow feed for dairy cows and livestock cannot be sustained.

## Top End Fire: Observations

I visited Kakadu from Gippsland 2019. It was 9 years since I had been to the Top End. We did days of driving, walking, watching and listening. Some observations:

- Scant (years old) wallaby dropping, two sand lizards - one fire tail and some dart frogs above Gunlom Falls
- No sign of any mammals at Nourlangie
- Scant dried wallaby scats above the creek on the rocks above Gabara
- No roadkill except one snake near Cooinda
- Two small dragons near the information centre at Cooinda where it's not burnt
- Cooinda night spotlighting revealed a large bat, a few small bats and bat noises. A few owls including the lovely resident pair of barking owls
- Spotlighting at Mirray Lookout carpark and track revealed no animal rustling or sign
- Plenty of buffalo dung and stallion piles in many places
- A few birds but not as many as there used to be

### Inappropriate Fire Concerns

- I saw no large trees at all in the burnt areas
- I noted medium 200mm girth trees damaged at base and canopy, which will likely fall down in the next fires
- Any trees with hollows had smoke coming out of each hollow
- I saw kites circling waiting for anything that did run out of the flames
- I saw immature paperbark forests being burnt again on the floodways. eg; at Gurrwirluk on 14/5/19.

A Parks Ranger at Yellow Water stated to me that 50% of the Top End has to be burnt each year. A statement in [this article](#) claims current deliberate mass burning in the Top End is “...to generate carbon credits for economic benefits for remote communities; and to meet Aboriginal cultural commitments.” Surely pre-colonisation half of the top end was not burnt each year.

It is disturbing that misinformation is being disseminated to the public.

The current 'carbon farming' industry is certainly causing destruction of ecosystems and crashes in biodiversity, as acknowledged in the [Submission from the Northern Territory Department of Environment and Natural Resources](#) to the 2018 Senate enquiry into the Faunal Extinction Crisis.

The carbon emitted in these fire regimes is not counted as an emission due to an unproved assumption that it is sequestered again in the following year. The other green house emissions which are released in these fires are never reabsorbed and yet this fact seems to be tolerated.

Russell Willis has run a bushwalking business out of Darwin for 30 years and sits on the Kakadu Tourism Consultative Committee. A few months ago, he warned the committee that unless prescribed burning is curtailed "there will be no park to preserve. The group I took on a walk in July will go home and tell people about walking through ash." The week-long route through woodlands and over rock plateaux was almost entirely burnt, he said.

Willis told readers in his bushwalking-related newsletter that prescribed burning was also devastating the Kimberley, warning: "If something doesn't change, the north Australian woodlands could be gone in a generation." He urged them to lobby Qantas to stop buying carbon credits generated by savanna burning.

## 'There'll be no park to preserve': Australia's fuming wildfire-control debate

The fire regimes employed around the country are not based on sound scientific evidence. In this time of climate change Australia urgently needs to increase biomass not reduce it. We need mulch on the ground to protect it and hold in the moisture. We need the canopy of big trees to shade and cool the ground during the dry. Regrowth of canopy trees means less volatile grasses growing underneath. The grasses that colonise burnt areas are as volatile as trees and burn very hot. [Moist forests resist fires.](#)

## In this submission I have discussed these concerns:

- Decline of the Gippsland Lakes
- Deeper dredging
- Increased salinity
- Reduced river flows
- Irrigation concerns
- Mining concerns
- Pollutants
- Flora and fauna decline
- Fragmented monitoring leading to inaccurate reporting purporting to but not meeting the requirements of the RAMSAR convention
- Deforestation, inappropriate fire regimes that are not based on science
- Aggressive clearing around fuel reduction burns roadsides
- Inappropriate unscientific fire regimes
- Unsustainable native timber harvesting
- Continuing logging and fuel reduction as normal while ignoring the impact of this years bushfires
- This is not normal!
- Urban planning concerns
- Feral animal and we concerns
- Hunting concerns
- Plastics
- Weakening of the EPBC
- Livestock contribution to ecosystem decline
- Concerns about Kakadu
- Inappropriate fire regimes driven by a false economy of carbon credits