

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA

By Johanna Selleck

I am writing this submission as a personal reflection on the devastating impact of the mass extinction of species that is occurring around us. The scientific evidence is indisputable, and I am sure the panel will have the facts before it. This provides the all-important context for my personal submission – the fact that Australia currently leads the world in mammal extinctions, that 66% of land in Victoria has been cleared and that 120 species in Victoria are on the brink of extinction. In the area where I live, in Knox, we have only 3% of remnant vegetation remaining. Of our plant species, 39% are locally critically endangered, 23% Endangered, 17% Vulnerable, and 6% Locally extinct. This is all well documented in Knox Council's *Sites of Biological Significance Surveys*.

But what does all this mean on a personal level and how does all of this make me feel? I feel extremely saddened and depressed and I think about this every single day. The reminders are all around me — every time I go outside or even look out of my window, as I am now, watching a baby kookaburra sitting on my verandah.

When I first came to live in the area of Upper Ferntree Gully, approximately 25 years ago, I was awakened every morning with a loud dawn chorus of birds. These days, we are lucky to hear one or two birds in the morning. We live on a block of approximately 1 acre, which has remnant vegetation including *eucalyptus melliodora* and *eucalyptus gonicalyx*, *kunzea ericoides*, and various grasses, sedges, creepers, and some native orchids. I love being out in our garden, particularly at this time during the pandemic, when people are realising more and more how important it is to be able to get outside, exercise in fresh air, and 'be close to nature'.

Through caring for my own garden and also the work I do in a number of local environment groups (particularly the Knox Environment Society (KES)), I have come to understand the importance of remnant plants and the need to maintain a healthy 'gene pool', without which plants become less resistant and eventually infertile. This decline is happening to many species in our area: after becoming very low in numbers, they fail to produce viable seed. For this reason, KES has implemented a rare and endangered plants program and I assist in this program by collecting cuttings and seed (we have a permit) and propagating these plants to be put back into local reserves and people's gardens. With this aim, KES started up the 'Gardens for Wildlife' program, which has been enormously successful and has been taken up by councils throughout Victoria.

The work I do at KES has led me to understand the need to rehabilitate my own block through a gradual, patient, process that allows the remnant vegetation to recover and re-establish. This has led me to understand why remnant plants are so important as distinct from simply 'replanting', and why the concept of simply 'moving' entire ecosystems (e.g. through offset planting) can never be equivalent or able to recreate the entire process of hundreds of years that led to the original intact vegetation. So cutting down vegetation on the basis that we can just replant somewhere else and it will be just as good is a false and dangerous premise. Our first aim should be preservation, then rehabilitation, if we are

seriously address the decline in ecosystems. Put simply, we just have to stop cutting down trees.

These trees in my block are hundreds of years old. I can view the same species on the hill opposite to us, adjacent to Glenfern Rd in Upper Ferntree Gully and Upwey. These trees were confirmed by Dr Graeme Lorimer in his *'Sites of Biological Significance'* to have existed prior to colonisation. For this reason, I am very saddened by some people's lack of appreciation. I have fought numerous subdivision applications to save these trees. We are often given certain assurances by VCAT and Council about landscape management on these properties including offset plantings, etc., but in reality, they do not happen, and the trees die one by one, cut down for driveways, their roots trampled by cattle and compacted by heavy machinery, and sometimes cut down to enable the owners a better view.

We have two important creeks in our area, and they suffer a similar demise at the hands of some landowners, who out of ignorance and a lack of willingness, allow weed infestation and erosion to occur, all of which impacts on all the flora and fauna and drives the momentum towards extinction. Our local community has fought hard to get better outcomes for these riparian areas, arguing with local councils to do more, trying to assist Melbourne Water, working with local landowners, and also taking cases to VCAT. This is often the only way we have been able to get better protection to help ensure the survival of species in our area, including the last population of platypus in the Dandenong catchment. This population is known to be in Monbulk Creek near to where I live, and our aim was to get permanent conservation zones along the creek, fenced off from cattle. We also wanted to ensure that Melbourne Water had permanent access via a 173 Agreements, so that they were able to undertake work on the creek as needed. Often, Melbourne Water is dependent on the good will of owners if they need to get machinery in for weed removal etc. along creeks, and often, as is the case in our area, owners are unwilling. I suggest that we need a clause in the planning scheme that allows water authorities access to a conservation zone along every creek, and this zone should be at least 30 metres in accordance with Clause 14.02. Our waterways are the 'life blood' of our country and need much greater care and protection than they currently get.

Hence, these sorts of protections just don't happen unless the community fights for them, but we should not have to do this, especially when it comes to trying to convince local councils, such as the Yarra Ranges, to do what they are already obliged but reluctant to do. The bottom line is that state and federal environment laws need to be much stronger and properly implemented. Even in our local area, we depend on both the EPBC Act and the FFG Act when we are in conversation with council, planning panels, and at VCAT. Often, in my experience, even the planning protections that currently exist are not enforced.

If the implementation of EPBC Act is going to be 'devolved' to the states as is currently before parliament, then it is even more important that we have stronger protections at state level. We have seen some major failures in regard to this by the Victorian Government, for example, the Victorian Regional Forests Agreements, which have resulted in illegal logging including the habitat of the critically-endangered Leadbeater's possum. And there are many other examples of the State Government overriding even RAMSAR-listed wetlands to make way for freeways and other infrastructure. Currently, the Victorian

Government is considering the travesty of allowing an AGL Gas terminal on another RAMSAR-listed wetland in Westernport Bay. There have been 10,000 submissions to this proposal, and there were 30,000 submissions to the review of the EPBC Act. This shows the level of community concern and the fact that we want these areas protected. But politicians often just don't seem to be listening

What is urgently needed is a 'trigger' so that once a species is listed as endangered or habitat listed as critical, the government is forced to must intervene, whether through the mechanism of a conservation order or other means. My experience in talking to councils, planning panels, VCAT, etc., is that even when a species is listed on the FFG Act or the EPBC, this often holds very little weight in terms of forcing developers to consider other options in preference to destroying habitat of endangered species. Developers including private landowners (not just large-scale big business developers) are frequently ignorant and actually do not want to know more because it poses an impediment to what they want to do. When groups that I am involved with have raised these issues of endangered species being threatened, I rarely see this information lending any weight to the final decision. This must change.

To return to my own garden, I try to be aware of every plant and every animal that I share this piece of land with. This land belongs to all these species not just humans — and they all have the right to exist. I don't 'own' these things just because I possess a man-made title to a piece of land. The trees on my property existed before I was born and may still be there after I am gone. What right do I have to say that I 'own' them? No-one can 'own' a tree or any other plant or a bird or animal in the true sense of the word to 'own' and we need to develop a sense of respect for our environment, because, in fact, we depend on it for our own survival.

At our back door, near to our dog kennel, we have watched pairs of many species of birds making nests because they seem to have realised that with the close proximity of humans and a sleepy dog, it will keep other predators at bay. Birds are clever, as is demonstrated in recent research in books such as *The Genius of Birds* and *The Bird Way* by Jennifer Ackerman. At our home in Upper Ferntree Gully, we have had the great privilege of witnessing, close-up, the successful raising of chicks in nests of a pardalotes (in a rock wall), brown thornbills, eastern spinebills, and yellow-faced honeyeaters. However, all these birds are becoming increasingly rarer, as numerous studies have shown, and I can see this occurring in the lower numbers that visit our home every year.

We need to learn to value every one of our fellow creatures and find ways to co-exist, which is possible if we can learn to be less greedy and think creatively in terms of planning for the future. But this needs long-term thinking towards long-term goals, and many politicians are too focussed on the next election. We need a quantum leap in thinking including the way we address issues of species decline and climate change. Perhaps the current pandemic will force such a quantum leap in thinking about the economy and the fact that if we don't look after each other the environment first, there is no hope for a healthy economy. For some people, it seems that language about economy is the only rhetoric they understand. But perhaps if they can be convinced that the economy will benefit from stronger action on the environment, then we might have a chance of saving this planet.