

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria.

I currently work in conservation land management as a member of an ecological restoration team. My background is in biological sciences (Bachelor of Science, Master of BioScience) and I am an associate member of the Ecological Consultants Association (ECA) of Victoria. However I am writing this submission on my own behalf as an individual Victorian who loves our beautiful natural landscapes and wants to help protect it for the sake of ourselves, future generations and importantly the countless other species which depend on 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;

- Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with around two thirds of the state cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants. In Victoria, over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are under threat. The declining state of biodiversity in Victoria was made profoundly worse with the Black Summer fires, which burned 1.4 million hectares, just in Victoria, and destroyed more than 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals, plants and other creatures. 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are now at the brink of extinction, while more than 70 threatened species make their home in forests that are still being logged. In 2018, Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability undertook a comprehensive assessment of Victoria's environment. Alarming, the health of Victoria's environment is considered 'good' in just 11% of areas, and is going backwards in 30% of areas.
- Our survival is dependent on the health of our environment. Ecosystem decline and environmental degradation have significant negative impacts on Victoria's public health and the economy. Ecosystem decline will result in increased surface and groundwater toxicity, lower air quality, less sequestering/filtering of harmful substances by plants, increased land erosion. Forests also play essential roles in climate control, air filtering, water cycling, oxygen production, etc. Relevant to the pandemic, loss of habitat forces animals to live in higher density populations and live closer to human habitation, increasing risk of zoonotic transmission.
- Increased risk of fire by mismanagement and clearing of forests (old growth forests play an important role in reducing fire risk), and the catastrophic societal impacts of climate change including severe weather, catastrophic fires, sea-level rise, drought and crop failure, etc. (native vegetation is an important carbon sink) also create a positive feedback loop. These processes both result from, and will continue the process of ecosystem decline.
- There are also mental health considerations. Studies have shown that people are happier when they have access to nature. People are encouraged to hike, camp and exercise in green spaces. Australians have a sense of pride and identity attached to our country, as well as guilt and dread about the continued destruction of landscapes we hold dear.
- I don't identify as an indigenous Australian, however I can imagine that First Peoples would be a section of society particularly impacted by ecosystem decline. For tens of thousands of years indigenous societies placed economic, physical and spiritual importance on sustainably

managing the land, and being custodians of that land. Two centuries ago white settlers forcibly removed this land (among committing many other atrocities toward First Peoples), and now to continue to degrade their ancestral home to this day, and barely seek any guidance, input or help from First People would perpetuate this pattern of neglect, disregard and intergenerational oppression.

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

- The two major acts governing Victoria's environmental protection, namely the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act), and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) appear to be the least effective. These are neglected, rarely enforced, and undermined by political processes and people with vested interests. There have been countless instances of environmental destruction by developers, agriculture and big industry with barely any repercussions for them. These Acts appear to be for display only, whereas real positive outcomes are not realized through a mix of poor compliance, monitoring and auditing.
- One example that strikes me often is that our gorgeous western grasslands are critically endangered, however every time I am in the west I see yet another housing development being built, further threatening these habitats. Surely the easiest and most cost effective way to protect our native ecosystems is to stop destroying what little we have left of them in the first place (through inappropriate clearing and development), rather than allowing developers to expand Melbourne seemingly infinitely and then trying to fix the problem retrospectively. The existing environmental laws seem to place no real restrictions on big business, as long as they can claim that the destruction they cause will apparently create jobs and improve the economy (very short-term thinking).

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

- Some projects which result in actual protection or creation of more good quality habitat are effective (e.g. Greening Australia, Landcare, Trust for Nature). Some government programs, particularly community restoration projects, were effective e.g. Weed Action Plan developed by the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee (GORCC), which has a dedicated conservation team who are implementing the actions and monitoring. However;
- The offset program is unworkable. Firstly the idea that you can replace long-standing ecosystems with increased management or a planting elsewhere is not realistic, but also it is impossible to maintain enhanced management 'in perpetuity.'
- Funded programs provide only short-term benefit to threatened species, but ongoing responsibilities often are not funded, so organisations operating with limited funds cannot continue momentum beyond the program.
- Whilst the quality of the restoration plan for a site may be excellent, the quality of restoration management can be extremely poor. Inappropriate management will never achieve the outcomes no matter how good the plan was.
- Government funded programs to restore ecosystems are currently not keeping up with the rate of environmental destruction.

(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;

- Hire policy makers who have a relevant background in at least science and critical thinking skills, but ideally ecology, environmental science or conservation. It is critical to recognise natural resource management, biodiversity planning, ecology, conservation science and related fields are highly skilled roles requiring minimum-level training and experience.
- Have an overarching body or organisation to ensure protection is afforded in all areas including regions that are primarily farming or logging regions as well as urban and peri-urban areas under development pressure, rather than relying on local government.
- Reduce vegetation clearing through legislation and provide stronger management of impact from clearing on threatened and common species and communities.
- Invest in renewables (the renewable energy sector would employ many people) and stop burning all fossil fuels by 2030.
- Victoria has more than 70 forest dependent threatened species, yet native forest logging is set to continue until 2030 in Victoria. This is despite a recent federal court case that found much logging in Victoria is in breach of national environmental laws and is directly driving animal extinction. Victoria should immediately transition out of native forest logging, with financial support for workers and the industry.
- Provide greater public education to increase knowledge, awareness and custodianship of native flora and fauna.
- Give the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 strengthened prosecution powers and apply to all of Victoria (not just public land) to facilitate intervention at State government level (rather than leaving Local government as the Responsible Authority) for projects that have a significant impact.

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

- Ensure our ecologically-focussed legislation requires engagement with First Nations peoples and provides them with the ability to input, veto and appeal decisions.
- First Nations People should be consulted in traditional techniques for fire management.
- Traditional Owners should be involved in management of reserves.
- Creating more protected conservation areas/state and national parks could be a source of employment for indigenous Australians in the tourism sector, I saw this done in QLD quite successfully.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this submission. I am looking forward to seeing the positive actions you will take for our environment in the future.

Eva Reda