

Dear Environment and Planning Committee, I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline.

My name is Imogen Fowler Steen and I am a 22-year-old student living in Melbourne. I grew up here in the city, but have always felt a much greater sense of belonging when I'm in the South Gippsland region of Victoria, where I have spent 3 weeks of every year since I was born.

I'm a musician, playing and making music is my passion. Most of what I write is inspired by my experiences in natural landscapes. It's an ever-present theme in my work, whether it's expressed in the form of bird samples that me and my family have taken from our camping trips in the bush, or in my lyrics, I wouldn't be the artist I am without a strong sense of connectedness to the land I live on.

My whole life I have loved hiking in Wilsons Promontory, a place that has always felt like home to me. When my mother was nine months pregnant with me, we camped in the Wilsons Prom national park, my little family that didn't yet include me, soaking up the sight of the stars.

This special area known as *Yiruk* or *Wamoon* to the indigenous Gunai/Kurnai and Boon wurrung people (who occupied this area for millennia), is mentioned in several dreamtime stories and is considered the home of the spirit ancestor of the Brataualung clan. The area remains highly significant today. Even as an Australian of British ancestry, it's not difficult for me to see how this place is considered special. I have grown up making cubbies in the bushland, swimming in Tidal River and climbing Banksia trees right to the top where I would hide from my brother. I always felt really safe and held in this land, a feeling that has stayed with me my whole life, and given me a great love of nature wherever I find it.

I'll never forget one year when I was about nine years old, doing the summertime drive to the Prom, excited and punching on in the backseat with my older brother. We came over the hill, which usually signalled the start of the lushness of the Prom, only to see a huge area of forest, ravaged by bushfires. It was a devastated

landscape, charred and black, and I remember being winded by a feeling of absolute horror and dread.

I later found out that these fires had been a result of routine controlled burns, that had gotten wildly out of control due to increased temperatures and dryness of the bushland. As we drove on we could see those yellow road signs with Koalas on them, indicating a wildlife rich area, and I couldn't help but wonder how many animals had lost their homes, or their lives.

Thirteen years later, Australia has seen the worst bushfires in recorded history, which in 2019-2020 swept across our country in spring, causing huge damage to property, wildlife and Country. This year, fires have already begun in NSW in *winter*. It is now beyond debate that this is a result of rising global temperatures caused by human made pollution in our atmosphere, among other human made causes. I worry that today, Victoria's environmental laws are severely outdated and far too weak on preventing further irreparable damage to our precious bushlands.

As a young hopeful Australian, I can imagine a society which lives under strong environmental laws, that stand to protect our diverse lands and wildlife. I want to live to see companies, organisations and government held accountable for destructive and careless behaviours that are destroying our country. More importantly, I want to see this damage reversed, with aggressive laws and regulations put in place that serve to protect our beautiful country.

1. The devastation inflicted on our wildlife and forests from the 2019 - 2020 bushfires has made forest protection and a rapid logging transition more urgent. The Victorian state government's commitment to a 2030 industry transition must be brought forward. Two immediate priorities are protection of unburnt Greater Glider habitat, and a continued moratorium on logging in East Gippsland.
2. There are opportunities for the state government to protect forests for all Victorians to enjoy now and into the future. Two community led initiatives are the proposed Great Forest National Park and Emerald Link conservation economy proposal.

3. In the face of climate catastrophe, Victoria's forests play a critical role in removing carbon pollution from the air we all breathe, nourishing us with clean air and safe, clean drinking water. The Victorian state government must develop carbon accounting and policies that include forests.
4. The state government must urgently implement and properly resource Action Statements (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements.
5. The rights and interests of Traditional Custodians should be recognised in all aspects of land and water management, as well as decision-making in relation to their traditional lands, including traditional management practices such as cultural fire. Declining ecosystems have profound implications for First Nations people.
6. Victoria needs a new, independent, well-resourced conservation regulator to police deforestation and other destructive industries. The EPA is the independent watchdog for pollution, but currently there is no independent watchdog to ensure industries comply with environmental laws, with numerous breaches to laws continuing to occur and a long history of regulators turning a blind eye.
7. Community rights must be guaranteed when governments are making environmental decisions, including the right to participate, the right to access necessary information, the right to challenge environmental decisions and the right to transparency in government decision making.

I hope to see our leaders at every level, in every role, doing everything within their power to honour the suggestions and hopes of the people who have written to you in these submissions. Thank you for reading mine, and I wish you the best of luck in standing up and protecting this land.