

Victorian Government Extinction Inquiry Submission

Dear Committee Members,

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

SETTING THE SCENE

I grew up in Eltham North in the 70s. When we moved there, everlastings covered the ground, all you could see was gold. We woke up to bird calls and explored the local bush, admiring native orchids, seeing the occasional tortoise, and so many native birds. And at night, there were so many more wonders: owls, flying foxes, possums in the trees, small marsupials, echidnas, even some kangaroos. As a child, I was told of the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer at school. I was relieved when governments around the world worked together to stop damaging the hole, and as I grew older, was confused about why we weren't acting to hinder this greenhouse effect. I watched destructive changes to the environment with encroaching suburbia. Even as a child, it was distressing to see massive new roads built, which meant chopping down numerous trees and grading over fields that held fragile and exquisite wild orchids and innumerable, delicate and mysterious insects. People came with dogs and cats; other families didn't tell their children not to pick the wildflowers (my parents never allowed us to), more roads, more houses, fewer birds, fewer flowers.

PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF VALUING OUR ENVIRONMENT

In a growing population much decline of nature is inevitable. I am writing today because I am distressed at the rapidity and acceleration of the declining state of Victoria's environment, which is in large part is gratuitous and not inevitable, or even necessary. We have the ability, the legislation and technology to stop destroying nature, at least with such alacrity. We have proven during this COVID pandemic, that if needs be, we can drastically alter the way we live. We know the science. To prevent further destruction of nature and imminent extinctions, we need to treat them with the same urgency that we have used to combat this virus. Pandemics like this one are ever more likely with environmental destruction. Extinctions of many more animals and plants will be unavoidable unless we address our environmental challenges now. And address them strongly. We have beautiful, elegant legislation, already in Victoria, to look after our community and our environment. We just need to make sure it is followed and nothing is exempt, especially massive infrastructure projects. The bigger the project, the more it should have to prove that it's environmentally sustainable, socially responsible and makes our city more accessible and equitable for everyone. It saddens me deeply to think the children of tomorrow may never see koalas in the wild, be woken by the entertaining cackle of kookaburras or a symphony of bird calls,

see bandicoots, echidnas or platypus in their natural environments. Even stop suddenly in awe and terror beside a resting snake, and watch it slither away. I grew up with these things. When we lose one, all of us are diminished. We cannot claim back extinct species. We need to preserve any we have left. And that means the natural environment, not big business and the economy, needs to be the dominant and overarching concern of government.

THE JOY OF NATURE

My family used to go bushwalking during most spring and autumn holidays. Mum and Dad would pack us four kids into a pale blue Kingswood Station Wagon and off we'd go. When we were tiny, we'd rent a caravan, but once we were all over 10, we just stayed in an old canvas tent. We explored the Grampians, Wilson's Prom, Hattah Lakes (now Hattah Kulkyne), Wyperfeld, Falls Creek, Mt Stirling, Mt Buffalo, The Cathedrals, the Gippsland Lakes. So many magnificent and mysterious places. My brother and I walked 17 km in one day at Wilson's Prom when we were three and five years old respectively – to Sealers Cove. I remember other people in the camping ground telling me in amazement how far I'd walked. It didn't feel far to my brother and me. We had loved every minute. Such is the call of nature. The sea. The plants. The birds. The animals. So many wonders. Little kids have so much energy when they love something – and growing up with nature aids that love. It did help that we lived in Eltham North, with extremely steep dirt road hills, and had walked four miles every day – the school was a mile away from home – we all walked our older siblings to school in the morning; then my little brother and Mum and I walked home. This was repeated in the afternoon. Even walking to and from school, there were wonders on route, which changed according to the seasons. There were so many animals and birds, so many beautiful flowers and I can't remember many weeds. They may well have been there, but they were many fewer than now. When bushwalking anywhere, we used to fill our bottles up with water from running streams – it was clean and safe. You can't do that in nearly as many places now. These family holidays were a wonderful time of refreshment and we'd return home invigorated. Eltham North itself was still a beautiful place to come home to; the holidays out bush were even more important when we moved closer into the city. In the city for me was Balwyn – still a location with large gardens and lots of trees.

I used to have such joy being in the natural environment as a child and young adult. The joy was pure and ecstatic. The only sadness I felt was when we had to go home. It never occurred to me that one day, within my lifetime, it might not be there. Bushfires of course, were already a thing, but the bush always grew back. I cannot think of a greater joy than just sitting, being lost in nature. Soaking in the bird calls, the stillness, the smells, hearing the buzz of insects, or the rustle of leaves and bark in the wind. Sleeping overnight in the bush with just a tarp, gazing at the stars, and

being woken by an angry wombat, koalas growling, and waking to the seven-part symphony of different bird calls. Gazing up at the giants of Toolangi (how many are still left?) with their ribbons of bark hanging down to the earth. These trees were truly awe inspiring, stretching 100 metres into the sky. It took about 10 of us to hug a tree.

THE URGENCY IS NOW

Such are my memories. But now so much of this is gone. Now, the awe remains, but the joy is gone; sadness is the overwhelming emotion. I am already grieving for our natural environment because I fear that next time, next year, it might be too late. I went to Victoria's High Country, to Mt Hotham in spring last year. I felt a deep visceral grief that the next generation will not see what I saw. Grief that we are destroying the environment so fast that we will destroy it completely before we understand that we can't eat money. And that very next summer, last summer the mountain burnt again, hotter than ever. It was just some of the record more than 1.4 million hectares that burnt in Victoria this year. The fires destroyed 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals, plants and other creatures.

It's not surprising to me that an assessment in 2018 by the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability showed Victoria to be in very poor health indeed. We have more cleared land than any other state in Australia - MPs from across the board need to take urgent and science informed based action to protect and restore our natural environment, and to improve and help to 'naturify' urban environments.

First the bushfires and now the COVID – 19 pandemic have prevented the Government meeting its legal requirement to respond to the State of Environment Report within 12 months. While understandably busy, much of that 12 months was prior to the emergencies. This is in itself telling – **the environment has not been regarded as important** enough to take precedence over other areas. Fires and pandemics and other natural disasters are exacerbated by environmental degradation, ecosystem decline and climate change. The COVID pandemic is just a dress rehearsal compared to what may come if we don't urgently and scientifically address ecosystem decline. **The environment must be taken seriously and prioritized above all other areas – our lives depend upon a healthy environment, more so than nearly any other area. Environmental security underpins all of our other securities.**

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

I am complicit in causing extinctions myself because I live within Victoria and work in a system that drives masses and masses of paper waste and use of single use plastics. I know that trees are getting chopped down and animals' homes destroyed so that we

can fulfill our compliance and auditing requirements. We are the most cleared state already – 66% of our land has been cleared of plants that support our native species. Trees need to be valued not just for their beauty, but for what they do: cleaning the air, creating oxygen, moderating the temperature, providing home for myriad animal species, stabilizing our weather patterns, stabilizing the earth and preventing erosion, keeping our water clean (90% of Melbourne’s drinking water comes from the catchments along the Upper Yarra – and how much of the recent pollution was exacerbated by logging in catchments?), attracting rain and of course, tourism. Worse, our wastage, this driver of extinctions, is not even necessary. We have the technology that would enable nearly all audits to be done remotely and with softcopies. This overuse of paper should be criminalized. We think it’s wrong to murder. Why isn’t it wrong to create a system which leads to ecocide, which has far wider implications than individual murders? Many animals will go extinct if we keep chopping down trees. Many more animals will go extinct from seismic testing, mining, oil exploration if we keep forcing people to drive cars instead of supplying healthier, cheaper and less environmentally damaging forms of transport.

It is extremely damaging to my mental health as I have to live with the cognitive dissonance that I am actively helping to drive the leadbeaters possum, the greater glider and many other species to extinction. So much for teaching making the world a better place! I teach my students to care for the environment at the very same time as ensuring its decline. This is an ecocidal system I’m working in and it needs to stop.

Excessive paper use is only one area in which we are destroying the environment and ecosystems and therefore driving extinctions. Nearly everything we do in our lifestyle and our system of government, that relies on endless growth, is destructive. The interconnections between destructive industries and governments is turbocharging the destruction. An example is the roads lobby.

SKEWED PRIORITIES

The government has spent billions more money on roads than on much more sustainable forms of transport for 50 years. Each freeway we build means masses of destruction to land and ecosystems to make room for it; and then the noise pollution and air pollution that follow lead to more environmental problems. And the insatiable desire for more roads. This massive build is accelerating, with one road, a 20 lane highway, is the government’s signature infrastructure build. This road is exempt from relevant acts designed to protect the environment and the community. Melbourne is a large city, but not so large that we need a road of this immense size. And how much environmental destruction, and even extinctions, will be a result of it (apart from all the other problems)? Another example is the Western Hwy, is considered more important than the knowledge and culture of First Nations’ people. The Victorian

Government is committed to building a treaty with First Nations' people at the very same time as destroying sacred places along both this road and the NEL. The magnificent 800 year old birthing trees, along with the animals that live in them, are set to be destroyed to make way for a highway. Have we learnt nothing from Rio Tinto? Cultural damage is irreversible and such trees are irreplaceable. The government says it's replacing each tree knocked down with 2 or 3 other trees. Ludicrous. How can you replace 800 year old trees? Young trees won't do the same job for nearly a millennium, and that's only on the off chance that they survive.

Roads are also much more damaging to the environment than train lines because they take up so much more space. Private vehicle use is the most expensive, exclusive and dangerous form of transport; and this focus on cars above people and above the environment is ludicrous. We need to be moving freight onto train lines again, not relying on diesel spewing trucks. First Nations peoples managed to live in Australia for 60,000 years without decimating the environment as we have in only 200 years. We need to lift up, respect and listen to First Nations' people if we're to have any hope of avoiding a mass extinction catastrophe.

SOME SOLUTIONS

We need to protect, not destroy our ecosystems. The world is finite. We need to stop relying on endless growth to support our economy. Nature has is a great healer, but even nature has limits. We are reaching those limits now. If we don't urgently act, more and more ecosystems will collapse and we will be powerless to stop it.

1. Prioritise the environment across all departments – recognizing that environmental security is foundational to all other securities. Rewrite legislation to require rigorous environmental standards to be implemented across all public and private businesses and government departments. This could include using only carbon neutral power sources and products, providers incentives to workers to cycle or use public transport etc.
2. Commence discussions about systems change – we cannot keep taking and taking. We have to stop relying on growth for prosperity.
3. Massively increase transparency of governance and government decisions. How can we say we live in a democracy when national security and commercial in confidence are used as excuses so that the public cannot hold anyone to account and then sovereign risk is used as an excuse not to revoke damaging projects? Ban political donations from major companies. Ban high level political lobbying from company reps. Ban the revolving door between politicians and companies.
4. Employ independent experts to environmentally assess all aspects of projects in lieu of the ESS process, and bill the company for it. Then they'd be working

for the good of the state, and not for a company. This would make the process less conflicted and we'd get more honest assessments. At present they always massively exaggerate benefits and sweep aside genuine, and important, irreversible damages they will do.

5. Stop logging. Stop water mining. Stop seismic testing. Build no more mines. Stop extracting. Make virgin items more expensive than recycled ones (factor environmental damage into the cost). Develop a truly circular economy. By supporting make and buy local, people will be more concerned about environmental impacts because they will feel them immediately – it won't be out of sight, out of mind. And with genuine cost reflected in price, a market mechanism could be used to support ecofriendly products to become mainstream.
6. Develop a just transition for workers in destructive industries and do it now. Friends of the Earth, Environment Victoria, ACOSS, VCOSS, Australian Conservation Foundation, the Climate Council and many other groups have rigorous plans for just transitions and COVID recoveries. Just pick one. We don't have time for continuous consultations.
7. Bring forward the plastic bottle deposit scheme and legislate for sustainable packaging materials in supermarkets. Ban all single use plastics, with exceptions for areas such medicine where nothing else is able to be used safely. If it's more costly to use reusable items, then ensure cost can cover repair of the damage done to the environment and to people – i.e. reflect the true cost. Hence we should be able to mainstream reusing and recycling over buying new.
8. Make all infrastructure beholden to, not exempt from relevant existing legislation. E.g. Transport projects, especially the massive ones, ought to comply with the Transport Integration Act 2010 and be beholden to the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017. These big projects do massive irreparable damage and are exempt from these acts. Application of these acts on everything would guarantee good outcomes. Projects such as the North East Link are going to irreversibly destroy ecosystems, including having a huge detrimental impact on the Yarra River. It's beyond logic, and morality that such projects are exempt from this act.
9. Address auditing requirements for businesses – transition to soft copy only to prevent the pull factor for massive paper overconsumption. And allow auditors to work remotely. Make the most of the COVID 19 disruption and keep remote work happening wherever possible. This would minimise the need for road and transport infrastructure and travelling pollution, and hotels etc etc.
10. Strongly encourage the community to engage with nature and to live healthy lifestyles by Prioritising infrastructure that protects the environment and makes it more convenient, and perceived to be much more convenient, to walk and

ride rather than to drive. Such actions have an enormous impact on climate change – transport emissions are something like 19% of Australia’s load. Give funding and tax incentives to city councils and businesses that actively promote healthy lifestyle change and active transport. Also massively prioritise public transport funding over roads. People in my own area nearly always drive because public transport is so bad. I try to encourage people to ride, as I do, but they’re too scared or can’t seem to understand they don’t have to be ridiculously fit. Planning to support remnant bush and help people to use it in daily commutes would increase the public’s love and understanding of nature. I don’t want to see my suburb further disappear under asphalt as roads are made wider and wider, and remaining habitats destroyed. Where will any remnant animals live?

11. Require housing estates to be built only once railway lines and wonderful public transport infrastructure are already there. Build only accessible car parking at stations and other community hubs at the same time as providing bike parking and reliable, frequent and extremely convenient buses, trackless trams, ride sharing alternatives. Aim to make private cars the minority form of transport.

Why are we even considering new gas and oil infrastructure and exploration? Billions spent by industry now will stymie efforts at climate change. They’ll want to get their money’s worth and will further obstruct climate action. Make such self-seeking obstructionism and environmental terrorism the offense it deserves to be.

The threat of ecosystem collapse across our state and the world, together with climate change, is a much greater and existential threat than the COVID 19 pandemic. The threats to our environment are more pressing than ever. We need to be able to both deal with the pandemic, and protect and restore our ecosystems: we all depend upon them.

I look forward to seeing strong action to protect and restore Victoria’s environment as a result of the work of this committee.

I am happy for my submission to be made public.

Christine Morris

