

Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

From:

Rob Youl

[REDACTED]

Tel

[REDACTED]

Mob

[REDACTED]

Skype

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Preamble

Past inquiries like this one have generally served to slow down decisions on taking action, and to deflect public attention or produce amnesia.

Rarely have they produced much progress.

This time we must act! And succeed! Or we've had it!

This time it's really important!

I urge you to produce a quick summary of actions, get them under way, and plan-as-you-go – less effort on policy, much more on results!

(I have seen far too many beautifully presented plans that sit thereafter on shelves, unread and unrefereed to.)

The community generally is desperate for action, but politicians have stalled progress, mainly because growth and wealth creation are paramount.

My general thesis is that ecosystem protection and restoration is a community-wide task. Government can't do it on its own – but it can support (lead even!) institutions, initiatives, individuals, landowners, laws, education, incentives and research – and much more, to achieve these aims. In itself, this will help build a more cohesive community – which we also greatly need.

I have a series of headings. I will not go into too much detail as I think most of my points are self-evident. Indeed most likely they will be well covered by many other contributors. I'm sure I will have missed some obvious arenas. (I have avoided comment on bushfire rehabilitation in eastern Victoria, as my knowledge here is generally from the media rather than acquired in the region.)

Ethos – action on global warming is central

The evidence for global warming is strong, indeed frightening, and strengthening weekly, and CV-19 makes action even more vital. We must all work together to reduce global warming. Billionaire's fortunes, private planes and yachts will be of little use to them or the rest of us in a devastated and seared planet with a battered population. On the other hand, besides being morally justified, a force for social strengthening and widespread character- and morale-building, promoting ecosystem protection and restoration will increase carbon storage and help the cause.

For a start it is essential that we switch to a carbon economy with far more renewable energy and recycling, and undertake considerable efforts to make agriculture more environmentally friendly – a process known as 'regenerative agriculture'. *Inter alia* the latter is about soil restoration (including soil organisms and organic matter); eliminating ploughing; less chemical usage; increasing farmland biodiversity; cell (and mixed) grazing; mixed cropping with shelterbelts; native pastures; restoration of flood plains; and maintaining cover.

Regarding floodplains and streams, farming and mining have almost universally altered northern Victoria's waterways - and many in the south, especially the drier parts of Gippsland. This has devastated riparian ecosystems, replacing them with erosion gullies. Engineering solutions frequently don't work, but re-creating chains of ponds (the pre-European hydrology) and revegetating streamsides to slow down and hold rainwater close to where it falls is worth much further study and testing.

We need to pay landowners to sequester carbon, and for protecting and enhancing ecosystems. The system should be robust and low-cost, monitored through regional Landcare networks rather than expensive metropolitan consultancies.

Recycling must prevail (with a particular push on abandoned car bodies) and proper disposal of toxic waste – I acknowledge this is all very difficult, but clearly, given the many fires and illegal stockpiles, over the last two decades the EPA has failed Victoria.

The emerging concept of burning waste to generate power in Victoria needs to be assessed quickly. It could help.

Very broadly, with the post-Covid unemployment, the skills of the workforce, the economy, energy infrastructure and climate in mind, a coalition of business, farming and conservation interests has lately put what seems a generally hopeful and practicable program to the Commonwealth. Victoria

should endorse this concept, including looking at encouraging the revegetation and carbon industry. (Joe Biden proposes something similar for the US.)

Importance of native vegetation

Native vegetation is generally the foundation of ecosystem conservation, followed by protection of understorey and litter to sustain insect and other life forms upon which birds, mammals and reptiles and so on rely.

We must do our utmost to protect remnant vegetation on private land and better manage public land. Clearing laws must be strengthened and their policing improved, with a strong educational element. I suggest regional decision-making with central oversight, including on offsets, perhaps through joint CMA-Landcare committees.

However, if we impose vegetation controls, we should pay landowners, however modestly, for these ecosystem services.

Revegetation programs must follow, building on these remnants to expand native ecosystems.

A further form of assistance is offering rate reductions for conservation management – some Victorian municipalities do this. Make it statewide!

(The writer's family 'owns' and, more importantly, manages 268 hectares of Trust for Nature covenanted bushland around St Arnaud, including very rare plant species. This produces no income, although much satisfaction. Rates to Northern Grampians Shire total some \$6000 annually.)

Landcare

Landcare has been an outstanding (and low-cost) success with its professionally staffed, self-governing regional networks that harness volunteers, collaborate with all tiers of government and seek out creative sources of support. A quiet operator, Landcare is generally overlooked or taken for granted. Across Australia, it has increased environmental awareness, strengthened communities and inter-generational ties, carried out innumerable projects large and small, provided very responsible jobs (and many Landcare staff have gone on from co-ordinator/facilitator roles to quite high positions) and, because of its multi-disciplinary (integrated), participatory approach, changed facets of applied science. Moreover, it has run hundreds of community events safely and fruitfully, frequently with Aboriginal participation.

Landcare is also so useful for rehabilitating communities after disasters (floods, fires, cyclones) that it should automatically have a seat at the table when any disaster planning is under way.

A good example of an effective Landcare network is Leigh Catchment Group, which covers the Yarrowee-Leigh basin between Ballarat and Inverleigh.

Biodiversity and revegetation projects are very popular with Landcare networks, especially broad biolinks (corridors of restored native vegetation) between major blocks of public land. Moreover three and a half decades of Landcare have seen a superb network of indigenous nurseries and seedbanks evolve. But they are closing down gradually – every one that is lost is a blow to biodiversity. (Note the importance of extensive seed collection programs for ecosystem reconstruction.)

Opportunities

The tourism industry makes its money from the environment, but pays little or nothing for access to landscape and ecosystems. It is rarely held accountable for damaging these ecosystems through excess visitation, litter, noise and increased (often ugly) infrastructure. Therefore it should be levied to help pay for restoring ecosystems.

A greater emphasis on eco- and cultural tourism might also be beneficial to the environment.

A major possibility: a Phillip Island *nature hub* also incorporating French Island (both to be fox- and cat-free) and the few bushland reservations on the mainland south of Lang Lang, including the former GM proving grounds. Phillip Island Nature Park has proved an excellent and entrepreneurial community enterprise, with some of its surplus funds going to research, reintroductions, fencing, pest and weed control and habitat extension.

Restore Australia is a major revegetation project program just getting underway, utilising overseas funds on an unprecedented scale to reforest very substantial areas across the continent.

I suggest the committee meets Restore Australia representatives asap – see its website for contacts – to look very closely at how the program might help re-create Victorian ecosystems in concert with state government action.

Having worked for decades in the revegetation arena, I see Restore Australia as a major element in our coming to grips with global warming.

Moreover, overseas funding can be readily supplemented with local corporate, philanthropic and individual contributions, and of course collaboration with other governments – see later.

Indigenous affairs

Aboriginal communities are regaining their pride and confidence, and should be further encouraged to contribute to biodiversity conservation through land and project management agreements and operational partnerships, works teams, consultancies, cultural interpretation, ecotourism and grants of land – especially station properties with substantial areas of marginal farmland that come up for sale from time to time. Aboriginal communities have knowledge, management skills, energy and new perspectives to offer Victoria.

Because many young Aboriginal people have grown up in rural regions, they find jobs in conservation (including burning-off) particularly appealing.

A good example of an Indigenous enterprise: Wurdi Youang Reserve west of Little River exemplifies an Aboriginal approach to grasslands regeneration under community leader Uncle Reg Abrahams, a Gunditjmara elder and expert project manager.

The Western Freeway debacle must not be repeated – Vicroads surely could have avoided this bitter and justified protest, given that so much opposition had been generated during the prior and adjacent Beaufort-Buangor project. How could Vicroads not have learned the consequences of its insensitivities? This is a Victorian disgrace! A great shame! The committee would help Victoria by encouraging Vicroads to change its ethics and revert to its old ways when it pioneered several new ideas for roadside management.

Science

Research must increase – through the universities and Royal Botanic Gardens especially, but ideally with community participation through Waterwatch, flora and fauna surveys, eBird and other citizen-science facilities, photopoints, landowner involvement and small-scale projects.

There are many excellent consultants who can contribute to research policies and programs. Perhaps the government, through your committee, could convene a conference of consultants to exchange ideas,

Politics

Achieving massive action on global warming will require a bipartisan approach – that's up to you, the committee members, to engender together. (One reason for Landcare's early successes at all levels was its bipartisan acceptability.)

Please look more closely at utilising CMAs to protect ecosystems – they can bring about a far greater degree of detail and community participation than the central state legislature.

CMAs can then work closely with their regional conservation and Landcare networks and landowners – as well as departmental staff.

Quarantine – restrictions on the pet, nursery and horticultural industries must be maintained and sometimes extended. (See Tim Low's *Feral Future*.)

To an outsider, VCAT seems to generally favour development at the expense of ecosystems. Many councils also seem unsympathetic to arguments against unsustainable growth.

The circle of natural landscapes around Melbourne is at great risk from quarrying, especially southwest Gippsland. This necessary but demanding industry must not be all-powerful; it, and therefore the community, have to be prepared to seek materials further afield, and to recycle.

Community

Parks Victoria's standard riposte to criticism is that it doesn't get enough fiscal or staff resources – this is true, but in my experience PV is not very good at handling volunteers – rather more so in the city than in more distant provinces, I suspect. (On the other hand, Landcare networks generally run volunteering well – and safely.)

There is great scope for job creation, including for young Indigenous men and women in well led works teams.

Organisations

For a good example of what two decades of community action can achieve, I suggest the committee visit Westgate Park at Fishermans Bend some three kilometres from the CBD.

Here on 45 hectares of coastal land, a community group, now called Westgate Biodiversity: Bili Nursery, has re-created a dozen or so regional ecosystems. This required planning, technical knowledge, inputs from nurseries - the group recently amalgamated with St Kilda Indigenous Nursery Co-op Incorporated – SKINC. Plus sustained hard work from volunteers, along with creative fundraising.

Incidentally, the reserve – part of Parks Victoria's estate – is home to one of Melbourne's burgeoning tourist attractions, The Pink Lake, which turns an almost magenta hue when evaporation has rendered the water highly saline, the colour being due to symbiosis between an algae and a bacterium. (Premier Andrews promoted the feature via social media last year, generating numerous visits, especially from Asian tourists, not knowing that the nearest public toilet was at least a kilometre away and a challenge to locate.)

Another very good example of an effective community body is Glenelg Nature Trust, based in Mt Gambier. Amongst its numerous virtues is that it covers both sides of the border. This is very rare in conservation – and in many other endeavours – and should be greatly encouraged because state borders have little or no influence on ecosystems. (Memo to your committee – where else does the border get in the way of common sense and conservation action?)

Glenelg Nature Trust, a community foundation, runs research, community events, education and publicity and owns and/or manages substantial conservation reserves in a very professional manner, including a major wetland, Walkers Swamp, on the edge of the Grampians.

I see this type of decentralised organisation as being a vital part of getting our natural environment back in order.

Moreover, Victoria now has some major private conservation reserves, which have predator-proof fenced extensive areas of farmland and bush and restocked the enclosed land with rare species – for example, Mount Rothwell near the You Yangs, and its associated Mortlake property. We need many more of these reserves – and indeed someone from the committee should visit New Zealand where they are quite common and on an impressive scale.

In addition a new form of business has arisen whereby companies buy land with natural values, restore it environmentally, then sell some of the land for residences and recreation, keeping the extensive residual areas for conservation. (An example: Cassinia Environmental at Kyneton.)

Other NGOs and community bodies with much to offer the cause are Trust for Nature, Bush Heritage Australia, VNPA, Conservation Volunteers Australia, the National Trust, Greening Australia, the catchment management authorities, the various regional conservation management networks – usually operating within Landcare frameworks, Field Naturalist Clubs led by FNCV, eBird Australia, Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, Birdlife Australia and many more.

Ecology

I must emphasise that metropolitan environments are important for conservation. Indeed Melbourne City Council and Melbourne Water are in many ways exemplary. The former manages its urban trees exceptionally well – including a praiseworthy mistletoe introduction program, and the latter does great work along waterways – for example the community-based Chain of Ponds project along Moonee Ponds Creek.

In my neighbourhood Albert Park and Westgate Park both have bird species lists totalling +160. City of Port Phillip staff members, with community support, are creating biolinks on median strips, along transport links and beachfronts to eventually build a network that birds, mammals and reptiles can utilise to move across the busy municipality. These biolinks, with their enhanced habitats, will eventually connect with similar reserves in neighbouring municipalities.

Of late, we have become aware of the botanical gems that have survived on the fringes of Victoria's golf courses. Happily, course managers and conservationists have developed alliances to protect and sustain these important occurrences. Well done!

Victoria once had an urban forestry development committee – it could be revived to promote urban revegetation – which also brings climatic cooling benefits.

Education

Junior Landcare programs get some attention, but there is scope to enlarge them. (Interestingly to me, some of the best such programs I have seen have been in South Africa and Uganda.)

Feral animals

I can see no alternative but to mount, in concert with NSW, massive campaigns by professional shooters, supported by recreational hunters, to reduce brumby, deer and feral pig populations to very low levels. Sadly, it seems too late for even that.

Likewise rabbit, fox, feral goat and other campaigns must be sustained.

Management

We must learn from New Zealand's experiences in pest control to conserve birds and small mammals – specialised fencing and bait lines, eliminating rodents and, in their case, mustelids.

As sea levels rise coastal protection will work in some areas; others will have to be abandoned – perhaps they will become new saltmarsh.

One interesting situation: why not protect and restore the sea-grass beds at the head of Western Port by starting to block off drain entrances into the bay, replacing them with a chain of coastal swamps just inland of the coastline. Couple these structures with many more water storages in the catchment to reduce silty freshwater flows to the upper bay?

We will finally have to grapple with recycling water for Melbourne. This could be a start.

As stated earlier, it's likely we can improve flood management by re-establishing chains of ponds.

Firewood gathering removes or disturbs large volumes of litter (carbon) from the forest floor, which has considerable effects on biodiversity – habitat, shelter, breeding sites, food – especially insect life, the population levels of which have apparently declined seriously of late. We should endeavour to switch to firewood from thinnings and plantations generally, rather than falling the remaining hollow-rich veterans.

Incidentally, Aboriginal fire management seeks to very lightly burn litter layers leaving the bigger limbs, stumps, branches, tussocks and understorey more or less intact. Obviously this benefits the life forms on the forest floor and in the soil. We need to look much more closely at these ancestral techniques – and be pleased that they have survived.

Animal welfare issues can be addressed by increasing shelterbelts in farming districts (and along roads).

Farm forestry plantations and agroforestry can also be very useful for habitat.

Logging public land and farm forests

I started in forestry in the early 1960s, but since 1975 have worked with the community and on private land. Accordingly I have had little exposure to contemporary harvesting in state hardwood forest, which apparently is largely automated. (My knowledge of fire suppression is similarly limited.)

Personally, I incline to a European approach to commercial forestry: longer rotations, decentralised decision-making (perhaps), smaller coupes, smaller machines, selection logging, localised processing plants, close ties between foresters and their communities, the quest for quality rather than quantity, all of which mean less disturbance to vegetation, soil and fauna. (By the way, this ethos seems to prevail in the smaller bush patches managed by Vicforests across northern and western Victoria.)

I have however seen plenty of agroforestry, of which I approve, finding it generally to be managed sensitively. (The committee could contact Otway Agroforestry Network to investigate some of these practices.) I also keenly support increasing timber plantations.

Funding: Business, Individuals, Philanthropy

I worked for 13 years for Landcare Australia Limited, retiring in late 2009. My point is that specialised environmental fund-raisers can help the cause by approaching businesses, philanthropists, individuals and other government agencies to support biodiversity and other restoration projects – and then professionally recognising and rewarding these contributions.

So much the better when carbon pricing finally comes in!

In 2001 I suggested to Victoria's CMAs that, when any major project eventuated in their region, the proposer should be required to contribute modest funds to appropriate community Landcare and conservation entities throughout the life of the development – be it infrastructure, factory, housing estate, mine, major farming change, energy production, freeway, port – and so on. Two decades have passed and it still surprises me no-one thought that achievable, except that I understand West Gippsland CMA now has a regional project fund for this purpose.

This is what generally happens: the developer stalls, saying it cannot afford to pay yet, but will consider doing so when income eventuates. This takes years, by which time no one remembers any more. Example: To my knowledge Iluka, which extracted mineral sands from West Wimmera farmland (but left major rehabilitation challenges), gave nothing back environmentally to the community at any stage of the decade-long operation.

Rob Youl

31 August 2020