

To whom it may concern,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria.

I hold a BSci from the University of Melbourne with a major in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. While undertaking this course I learned about long-term geological and evolutionary processes that have led to the rich diversity we see on earth today, as well as the ways that humans have interacted with our planet over time, particularly in the relatively short period since industrialisation.

The impact of industry and largely unrestricted growth on natural ecosystems is unambiguous.

Natural ecosystems support all the processes that humans quite literally rely on for life - fresh water, soil health and nutrient cycling for food production to name a couple. We also cannot forget that these 'wilderness' places hold meaning that is integral to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people, in ways not understood or encapsulated by Western philosophy. The body of evidence demonstrating that natural ecosystems are being destroyed and degraded at a rate previously unseen in human history is irrefutable. One's political alignment cannot change the facts.

Victoria's environmental laws should exist to ensure that we can enjoy the natural world now and into the future, and that the already diminished level of biodiversity we have now is protected. We are in the midst of a mass extinction event that is being largely driven by human activity. This is a terrifying prospect, but it does not mean that we have no ability to change the course we are currently on. We should be proud of what we have and make meaningful legislation to protect it

It is worrying that in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic that such an important Inquiry is not receiving much public attention, despite it also being essentially an issue of public wellbeing and health - for now and for future generations, and particularly for Indigenous people.

The state of Victoria has set a target of net zero carbon emissions by the year 2050. The processes that contribute to ecosystem decline - land clearing, urban sprawl, over-extraction of natural resources and invasive species - are intrinsically linked to climate change as well. It does not make sense to set a goal in one area and not use an opportunity to work towards it with a parallel issue.

Environmental Justice Australia has put forward the following reforms that aim to ensure a better future for Victorians in the sphere of natural heritage, wildlife and resources:

1. Resource and implement the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is the centrepiece of Victoria's biodiversity conservation legislation. Reforms last year have "refreshed and modernised" the Act, updating the objectives, adding a new duty for public authorities, and introducing new conservation tools. However, none of these reforms will be worth the paper that they're written on if they are not properly implemented.
2. Make sure our nature protection laws are climate ready. The past summer's devastating bushfires demonstrate the terrible impact that climate change can have on our wonderful natural places and wildlife. Climate change presents a massive challenge to Victorian ecosystems. Failing to address climate change stops our laws working effectively. Climate adaptation must be a part of our legal frameworks.
3. Improve compliance and enforcement with our environmental laws. A significant change was made last year when, following a damning review of timber harvesting regulation in Victoria, the government established the Office of Conservation the Regulator. This move, while a welcome recognition that the implementation and enforcement of our nature protection laws needs to be improved, does not go far enough. We need an independent conservation regulator with a clear

legislative foundation and all the legal powers needed to ensure Victoria's conservation laws are compiled with.

4. Protect Victoria's precious wildlife. Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 is out of date and no longer meets community expectations when it comes to protecting our precious wildlife. It should be reformed to make sure that it meets the Victorian community's expectations for how our valued wildlife will be protected and preserved for future generations.

5. Prevent the harmful impacts of new development. While the Morrison government is in a hurry to handover responsibilities under our national environmental law - the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act - to state governments, we know that Victorian laws are not fit for purpose. Victoria's planning laws and environmental impact assessment laws need to be brought up to date to make sure that infrastructure projects properly account for their impacts on Victoria's biodiversity before we even think about handing over responsibilities.

6. Stop the drivers of ecosystem decline. Nature protection laws should be a safety net. We need to address the pressure on Victorian biodiversity protection laws by removing key drivers of ecosystem decline such as native forest logging, unsustainable use of water resources, and the impact of invasive species. Stopping native forest logging sooner rather than later, more sustainable water resource management, and new fit for purpose invasive species management legislation are needed of ecosystem decline is to be turned around.

7. Boost ecosystem restoration. Nature protection laws alone will not be enough – our laws must also guide and encourage the restoration of Victoria's ecosystems. With climate change already having a terrible impact on Victorian flora and fauna, the challenge is urgent. Whether it be on public land or private land, our land management must be subject to appropriate obligations to ensure that ecological processes and natural assets are there for future generations to enjoy.

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and I hope that the Inquiry makes the most of this opportunity for positive and sustainable change amidst such a challenging public landscape as a post-bushfire environment and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

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