

Victorian Legislative Council – Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Submission & Response, Alex Arbuthnot AM, Sale, Vic. July 2020.

Thanks for the opportunity; and as a leader in Agribusiness & Landcare I generally feel that there is too often a misunderstanding on the roles and successes of farmers & rural landowners in preserving biodiversity.

The format of this submission; General Comments, Responses to TOR, Solutions & moving forward. For the benefit of the submission I have adopted an 'ecosystem definition' – Biodiversity of Natural systems.

General Comments.

Over the years if have experienced the amazing growth of Landcare, nationally & internationally (in over 22 countries) and without doubt the world's leading environmental movement. I have had the honour of sitting on nearly every state & national Landcare, NRM Boards & Committees.

Note ABARES surveys (2) highlight – 92% of Australian farmers are in a Landcare group or practise Landcare. (this is not surprising as successful farmers soon learnt that working with nature is good economics). Our other success story is that Landcare, NRM Boards understand 'catchment management' concepts. (underpinned the State regional salinity plans & now our NRM plans)

I wish to also highlight a social issue factor that influences policy development with Governments & particularly with State. Very often rural & farmer views are overrun by the influences of noisy minority groups that are city based. The same 'noise' is being made on Climate Change (CC) & on biodiversity. How often is the finger pointed at the farmer for destroying the biodiversity by our 'city environmental & 'green groups" – when most of Melb's biodiversity is covered with concrete or bitumen! & note housing development/houseblocks are exempt from BioD regulations. And expect the many of the same crowds that marched in our cities supporting more recognition for our 'First Peoples' will march against adopting their fire management practices, (see later). I have attended lectures at Melb Uni and listened to the same accusations against the farmer landowner & raise the point 'that there is negligible biodiversity on MU grounds & I also notice that most of the green areas are very weedy too.

Terms of Reference (TOR).

- (a) Addressing impacts of decline
 - 'impact on people - I generally feel that majority of people enjoy 'the bush' & our natural environs (parks etc) & have support for BioD in a general way.
 - Particularly First Peoples - Not sure whether the generations that have assimilated into urban lifestyles hold differing views to 'above comments'
 - . historically their survival was 'Living with Nature' & esp. the fire management regimes ensured survival of BioD.
 - . certainly, as a farmer – their skills as VG stockmen probably valued many aspects of BioD.

- . not sure that 'sacred areas' have a BioD value but they need recognition & protection & that includes marine areas.
- CC - without doubt changing climates impact on BioD & Vic does need to consider Research by Dr Ary Hoffman MU (I understand Queensland Govt engaged Ary to do some R on CC impact on some species)
- I am also aware of the Heritage Protection Clauses in Legislation. Once again, my Indigenous friends believe they have created confusion and misunderstanding with many Landholders.
- Legislation Frameworks.
 - I presume the principal Act is CALP - & I understand is up for review.
 - . certainly, penalty clauses for pest plant & pest animal need reviewing as it is almost impossible to win a court conviction.
 - . note farmers often ask me as to whether Govt owned land (Parks etc) or Govt institutions (Parks Vic) are subject to the same laws?
 - . ref. to grasslands, marine parks-certainly covered by the same laws, but legal processes often difficult to bring into effect. Perhaps we should build an ethic with land managers? (& discuss later)
- Effectiveness of Govt programs.
 - Fire Management (public lands) is an appalling disgrace! Although there has been inquiries into all major fires almost none of the recommendations are implemented. Our First Peoples forest management using frequent fuel reduction burns preserved the bush and the biodiversity. Practices learnt from hundreds of years of learning. And yet we totally ignore! Even recommendations on having major firebreaks and maintaining access roads are ignored.
 - Management of Victoria's Parks & Public lands for weeds & pests is also disgraceful with many parkland streams 'choked' with blackberries.
 - SOE Report (every 5 years). Although a VG data Report (and I had the pleasure of sitting on their Advisory Committee) I always noted that data /information on pests was inadequate.
 - Management of roadside vegetation & natural BioD is also questionable. Note that farmers (illegally) clear roadsides for fire protection. However, Shire & Govt Roads are generally overgrown with weeds that threaten any BioD benefits.
- CC change impacts on Govt Policy & Programs.
 - CC, BioD, Ecosystem policy should always be based on credible & recognised Research. And NOT influenced by the noisy majority that reside in our Cities. And as we often notice the noisy city marchers are not 'doers' and rarely see them fighting fires or even doing some weeding in our Parks.
 - Another V imp. issue- is credible consistent data & measurements. Ministers often raised this point with me as always at Budget times the Treasurer needs 'measured results'.

. 2 points – consistency of Data – Many Depts & Organisations (Shires etc) used differing computer programs.
. many environ/catchment outcomes are long term programs & benefits/impacts long term.

- Opportunities to restore BioD & improved environs.
- Develop programs based on good R&D & community ownership.
- Victoria Govt could become a world leader by trialling variable; management systems on Public Lands. These could range from being innovative (commercial) to V conservative & include our First Peoples fire management programs.
- Research use of Modified Ecosystems for beneficial outcomes. Note Dr Robert Faggian (Deacon Uni) proposed projects with beneficial outcomes on morasses for water storage & BioD outcomes

- Other Matters.
- Recommend that Govt investigate payments to farmers for protection of BioD & for BioD outcomes on properties. (VFF & NFF policy)
- Recommend that Govt discuss the benefits of building an ethic across communities/businesses etc supporting land management that facilitates improving ecosystems- this to be additional to regulatory processes.
- Recommend Govt support for Landcare Facilitators, Landcare projects & Programs. (do excellent work in BioD & in CC)
- Support VAC (Vic Agribusiness Council) to facilitate programs in regional Vic.

Many of the comments in this submission I have made before as I review & comment on Govt's Policy Papers.

If I was to favour one gain / action from the Parliamentary Inquiry – it would be adopting Fire Management practises that our First Peoples had used for centuries to preserve ecosystems and biodiversity.

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