

Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Dear members of the Committee, I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

I ask that the Committee views native forest logging in Victoria as a serious matter of consideration and as a huge driver of ecosystem decline in Victoria.

I grew up in the Shire of Murrindindi and I love the forests and landscapes in the Central Highlands of Victoria. It was always my intention to return to the area later in life after studying in Melbourne. However, as the area becomes more and more degraded by logging and fire, I find myself wondering if I can ever really return to my home. I certainly won't be able to experience it as it was. Rubicon State Forest, my favourite place to go when I was young, has been decimated by clearfell logging to the point where it is unrecognisable. The ecosystem there is in visible decline because of this damage and weeds and pests have encroached as a result. Snob's Creek has also recently been trashed by logging.

Driving around the places I grew up and elsewhere in the Central Highlands is no longer the exciting adventure it used to be, because I can clearly see hills lopped off by logging coupes and logging scars right across the landscapes. The devastation of a freshly logged coupe should be enough to horrify anyone. VicForests have a record of their 'replanted' coupes not re-establishing properly and mature and establishing forests, with all their ferns and wet undergrowth, can not just be replaced by monoculture saplings – not to mention the crown fire danger younger trees encourage. VicForests do not manage landscapes, they decimate them.



The forests in the Central Highlands are like nowhere else in the world. They are the most carbon dense forests in the world – so surely their significance in the midst of a climate crisis should be self-evident. They produce drinking water for Melbourne and surrounds and they are home to astounding creatures like the threatened Greater Glider and the endangered, endemic Wollert (the Leadbeater’s possum), totemic to the Taungurung people. These forests are a stronghold for threatened species and it has been clearly demonstrated that logging is exacerbating their decline.

The forests, with their tall tree ferns and rich biodiversity, are a place of peace and refreshment. I would do anything to live out amongst them instead of in the suburbs right now during COVID lockdown. Victorians need these places for our physical and mental health.

It astounds me that the Victorian government is apparently going to let these ecosystems collapse. The mountain ash ecosystems that cover the Central Highlands are [critically endangered](#) already. They will not withstand more logging until it is set to cease in 2030. A transition to plantations needs to begin now, with the greatest of urgency.

We need to make our decisions in context. In a climate and ecological emergency and an extinction crisis that threatens the end of life and nature as we know it, we cannot let native forest logging continue. Because of increased frequency and intensity of fire, drought, storms and other climate impacts, the ecosystems in Victoria are already going to inevitably decline and radically change. This is heartbreaking. But if we focus on what we can control now: we *can* stop wilfully destroying these areas for cheap products made of wood chips.

We *can* let these ecosystems re-establish so that they have the best chance of protecting themselves from these climate impacts. We *know* that older forests resist fire events better. We *know* that these climate dense forests are our greatest asset when it comes to protecting Victoria’s ecosystems and communities from climate change. Let’s protect them, restore them, and let them function as they should: to protect the land, the water, the animal life and the communities that depend on them. Everything is connected: logging these forests will worsen climate change, letting them re-establish will mitigate climate impacts. It should be a no brainer.



Forest logged tomorrow has elevated fire risk until 2060. I really feel like if I move home to Murrindindi Shire I am jeopardising my own safety and that of my family. We know that trashing these ecosystems for woodchips annihilates species, sucks 1,000 litres of water per second from the landscape and our water catchments and heightens fire risk unimaginably. (For more information please contact Professor David Lindenmayer and ask for a copy of the presentation he made on Victoria's forests at [Murrindindi Library Service](#)). If the risk was at all mitigated by good policy, or at least a timely move away from logging, perhaps I would move home. At the moment though, the idea seems dangerous and reckless.

When fire ripped across Victoria and decimated East Gippsland's stunningly unique forests I was devastated. This is going to keep happening over and over. How could we possibly log what is left now in good conscience? Irresponsible practices like salvage logging have been proven to have a huge impact on bird life. After all the deaths of birds already, [like the ones in Mallacoota](#), how on earth could the government approve practices that worsen this?

I would like to see in the future thriving forest ecosystems that are allowed to establish properly and the recovery of our threatened species. This means stopping all native forest logging *now*, (obviously transitioning workers to dignified work in plantations and other industries and/or giving them all the support they could possibly need is a must. This is doable, we have seen what is possible in crisis during the COVID emergency).

I would like to see these forests enjoyed by the community and walks and hikes established so Victoria's forests can be enjoyed like those in Tasmania. The Great Forest National Park in the Central Highlands and the Emerald Link are brilliant ideas that have been well modelled, but there needs to be more of an emphasis of First Nations leadership and First Nations' designed solutions, so this would have to be key in consultation around these proposals. If some of the research and modelling from these proposals was available to Traditional Owners so that they could redesign it themselves, that would be ideal.

Victorians landscapes and ecosystems should be primarily managed by its Traditional Custodians. In the case of the Central Highlands that is the Taungurung and the Wurundjeri people and in East Gippsland the Gunnai people. Their incredible connection to this landscape needs to be respected. Their knowledge will be able to provide the care required for these ecosystems, especially as they adapt to climate impacts. When I say Traditional Custodians, I don't just mean those that sit on the boards of Aboriginal Corporations, I mean the entire First Nations community. There is a lot of opposition to logging from the Original Custodians of this land and those voices need to be heard – and they should lead the transition toward more sustainable management of these ecosystems. Many of these Traditional Custodians already have relationships with top scientists and ecologists who have studied these areas over the long-term, like Professors David Lidenmayer and Chris Taylor. These experts need to be listened to as well to ensure the careful management of these landscapes, for the benefit of us all.

Aside from an *immediate* end to native forest logging and a transition to First Nations led management and restoration of the forests, the state government must also urgently implement

and properly resource Action Statements (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Again, this should all be done in proper consultation with Traditional Owners and also in consultation with conservation groups and scientists with knowledge of these species. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements.

Victoria also needs a new, independent, well resourced conservation regulator to hold industries to account as we transition. 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. I don't think there should be any more logging or other extractive industries in our forests at all, but no matter what the undertaking or development, rigorous assessment and regulation must be present to prevent industry acting with impunity.

Importantly, community rights must be guaranteed when governments are making environmental decisions, including the right to meaningfully and deeply participate in decision making, the right to access necessary information, the right to challenge environmental decisions and the right to transparency in any government decision making. Ideally, Traditional Custodians, scientists and communities should collaborate on decisions about our environment and ecosystems and then the government should help implement their decisions and recommendations and enforce these agreements.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I agree to this submission being made public.

Best Regards,
Kimberley Croxford

