

To: ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au

Date: August 31st, 2020

From: Karen Alexander, OAM.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

My name is Karen Alexander and I have undertaken decades of work addressing the decline in biodiversity in this state nearly all of which has been with ENGOs (paid and unpaid).

I have worked at the international level (with UNEP on impact of tourism on the environment), at national level (Campaigns Director, ACF; President, Bush Heritage Australia), state level (Victorian National Parks Association, Farm Tree and Landcare Association), and locally (founded Johns Hill Landcare Group, co-founder Cardinia Environment Coalition, Southern Ranges Environmental Alliance).

I live on 10 hectares of land near Emerald straddling the Menzies Creek that was cleared by my grandfather 100 years ago. It is being revegetated by us and seven hectares is now good enough quality to be covenanted with Trust for Nature.

I feel a huge sense of failure. The data for Victoria is even worse today than 40 years ago on nearly all counts.

The inquiry is of extreme importance: many (if not most) submissions will include data on our threatened species, ecological systems and ecological processes.

A. While some things are improving the overall picture is dire. This has been known for decades:

- All Victorian Government *SoE* Reports;
- All *Health of our Catchment* reports (Victorian Catchment Management Council five year report),
- The State Government Green and White Papers on Biodiversity, and its conclusions: *Land and Biodiversity at a time of Climate Change*;
- Yet another plan to address the known degradation that is happening: *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037*

Going back to 1987, now a generation ago:

- In *Protecting the Environment. A Conservation Strategy for Victoria*. June 1987, the then Premier, John Cain wrote:

Fellow Victorians

Like most developed regions in the world today, Victoria is facing serious environmental problems that must be overcome, both for our own sakes, and to ensure that our children and future generations inherit a land worth living in.

In the 150 years since European settlement the Victorian landscape has undergone dramatic and in some cases disastrous changes. Half of the State's original forest cover has gone and many native plant and animal species have become extinct; thousands of hectares of once fertile soil have become salted or eroded wastelands and many of our waterways are polluted. If the deterioration continues at its present rate, the Victorian landscape could be totally changed within a generation.

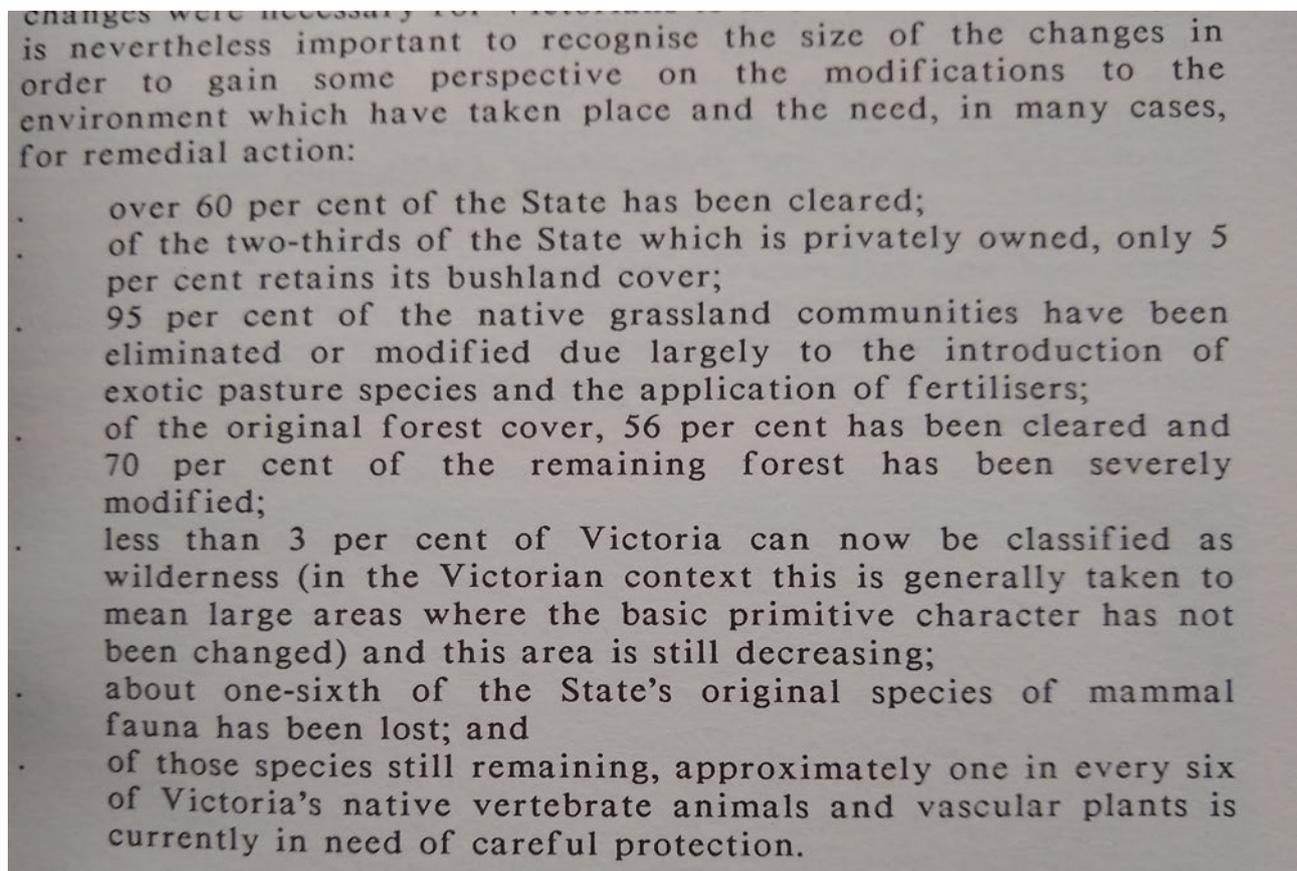
Protecting the Environment. A Conservation Strategy for Victoria. June 1987 p27

B. The disaster data has not shown much change for the better in spite of the incredible work by many local groups such as Landcare and Friends of groups, and others, as well as stated commitment via various strategies by government:

The disaster data today (thanks to Victorian National Parks Association):

- Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by subregion in Australia. Since European settlement there has been a progressive rate of native animal and plant extinctions with Victoria losing 18 mammal species, 2 birds, 1 snake, 3 freshwater fish, 6 invertebrates and 51 plants. Of the 3,330 known Victorian species, 49 are extinct and 2,097 (63%) are on the Threatened Species Advisory Lists.
- There has been an increasing trend in the number of critically endangered and vulnerable vertebrate groups, specifically reptiles, and an increase in the number of endangered vertebrates. Of the known species, those that are threatened include: 22% terrestrial mammals, 19% birds, 30% reptiles and 43% amphibians.
- More than a quarter of Victoria's wetlands have been lost since European settlement, and the remaining are mostly in poor condition.
- Native vegetation continues to be lost at approximately 4,000 habitat hectares per year.

Over 30 years ago we were saying the same things. From *Protecting the Environment. A Conservation Strategy for Victoria*. June 1987 (p27):



Some of the key drivers of ecosystem decline in Victoria today appear to be the same as what was driving decline in 1987¹:

- Habitat fragmentation – caused by centuries of land clearing, but slowly but surely still happening.
- Climate change – this is multiplying impacts of other drivers of decline, such as fire and water.
- Inappropriate fire regimes – especially unseasonal or too frequent fire.

¹ They are not listed but some are in the body of the 1987 publication that I have yet to read all the way through.

- Invasive animals – such as feral deer, pigs, goats, horses, rabbits, cats and foxes.
- Invasive plants – such as serrated tussock and willows.
- Native forest logging – which fragments forests and damages habitat for forest-dependent species.
- Unsustainable hunting of native wildlife – like native duck shooting or over-fishing.
- Altered water regimes – due to dams or over-extraction.
- Population growth – especially around metropolitan and large urban centres, lead to permeant land clearing and fragmentation.
- Land-use intensification – including increased grazing pressure or changing from grazing to cropping or irrigation.
- Inadequate public resources for ecosystem management – increased investment needed as we are still going backwards.

So what to do?

I am not in a position to give comprehensive set of necessary actions if we are serious about addressing this issue but would like to make some strong recommendations given my personal experience with our local landcare group over almost 20 years, and on our own property in Emerald over the same time.

Recommendation 1:

Given that:

- A high likelihood of ongoing annual funding (average of \$900 pa since 1998 from Melbourne Water) was crucial to the revegetation of our property to covenanted status. This grant complemented our own funding and work,
- There have been few opportunities for ongoing funding for the vast majority of the landcare grants received by our local group for work on private land. To reverse a weed situation, or revegetate an area nearly always takes more than one or two years; only then does the management workload reduce and a landowner should be able to manage.

So:

- Funding for individual property owners, and grants for Not-for-Profit groups eg landcare, must, largely, be for at least a 5 year and preferably a10 year commitment. While annual review of progress and financials must occur that is done within the context that ongoing funding is guaranteed if the annual review is satisfactory.
- Melbourne Water Stream Frontage grants for individual property owners are an example of this.

Recommendation 2:

Given that:

- Private land that has largely been cleared since invasion of Victoria and is ongoing.
- While protecting what is left on private land is essential there is a huge need for ‘enhancing’ and ‘connecting’ bushland on private land
- The effort required to ‘enhance’ native vegetation is huge: we have spent 20 years and thousands of hours revegetating 500 metres of creekline – a tiny amount of land that would take a bulldozer less than a day to destroy.
- For every taxpayer dollar invested in our place via the Melbourne Water Stream Frontage grant there is approximately a 500% return in leveraging other investments (mainly our time and money) to get the required outcome.

- Gains made in quality and extent of native vegetation on private land funded by the taxpayer are often lost when the property changes hands. This is a criminal waste of taxpayer money (and often landcare volunteer time).

Then:

- Native vegetation clearing controls must be tightened and compliance measures tightened.
- When taxpayer money is used to enhance native vegetation that the requirement for ongoing management regardless of owner must be to manage for those conservation values the taxpayer has invested in. This should be on title (covenant), or Section 173 (not much use). It should also be a requirement for information in Section 32 for sale document.
- That taxpayer investment leverages huge returns and can be a very effective way of enhancing and extending bushland on private land; this can provide long term outcomes for nature provided the gains are protected in some way.

Recommendation 3:

Given that:

- Our property and the revegetation that taxpayer has contributed to is now being impacted by deer.
- Just a few kilometres away is Melbourne Water managed land surrounding Cardinia Dam. At last count a few years ago there were 600 sambar deer on this property. To my knowledge (pers comm from police) there has been no culling since that count. In the other direction, in the Dandenong Ranges National Park, there are large numbers of sambar making a huge impact; there is no money for culling. (See submission by various conservation bodies on deer in this area.)
- These huge animals will cause the death of a motorist sometime.
- They are also having a huge impact on agricultural enterprises with the high cost of professional shooters, and suitable fencing.
- And on isolated state reserves such as Yellingbo the home of our state bird emblem, the Helmeted Honeyeater.
- The deer are hardly likely to disappear even if declared a pest.

Then:

- Finalise the Deer Strategy, including naming deer as a pest species, and other actions as per the submission by the Victorian National Parks Association.
- Provide adequate funds to implement the Strategy.

ENDS