

Michelle Fox



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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Dear Committee Secretary,

I would like to make this submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Victorian Extinction Crisis.

I would like to share a couple of childhood memories with you in an effort to express why this issue is so important to me.

One of my favourite things to do with my father when I was a little girl was to look at the creatures growing and living in the rock pools at the beach. There were small fish swimming and crabs scuttling amongst the swaying sea plants in the sparkling water, and all sorts of other creatures moving around or clinging to the walls of the pools, opening and closing with the gentle waves, exposing their amazing colours and shapes. My father and I talked about these creatures and their lives in the sea. Those pools were fascinating, and filled me with a curious wonder of the natural world and enlivened my creative inspiration. I grew up in Sydney and Bondi was my local beach.

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I moved to Melbourne in my early 20s and I have lived here ever since. When I return to Sydney I visit Bondi to breath the salty air and remember those days with my father but my visits feel so sad now. My heart breaks when I see the rock pools empty of all life. The creatures in those rock pools have vanished, all the plants have vanished too. Instead of looking at a wondrous, life-filled, colourful scene, I look at empty, lifeless, grey hollows filled with dull and sludgy-looking water.

The other memory I wish to share with you is also from my Sydney childhood. This time from Watsons Bay. I remember the rocks near the wharf. The rock pools there were so different to those at Bondi even though they were only a few land kilometres apart. At Watsons Bay, the rocks were covered in tiny, bright blue sea snails. The impression was that the rocks were painted a brilliant, bright blue. It was impossible to walk out onto the rocks without crushing the little blue snails. Sadly, as with Bondi, things there have changed too. Sometimes I can spot tiny clusters of 2, 3 or 4 of the blue sea snails. It is nothing like the thousands of them from my childhood.

I feel a deep sadness and a huge regret about it now. You see, as a child I ran out onto the rocks and felt those tiny shells crush beneath my feet. It felt wrong but none of the adults said it was wrong so, I pushed my uneasy feelings into the background and brought forward my exuberance of childhood as I leapt about the rocks and rock pools, not understanding that these creatures were fragile and finite. Now they are all but gone, extinct or dangerously close to it, and like Bondi, the rocks are grey, lifeless and dull.

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I wish I had a responsible adult to explain the importance of respecting and treasuring these creatures and to tell me not to trample the sea snails in pursuit of my own pleasures.

It is really impossible to describe how much my encounters with this natural world has meant to me through my life and how devastating it feels to see it disappear. Somehow the adults responsible for my world didn't understand the value of the natural world we were in and didn't teach me how to live in it responsibly.

In Victoria, I have had some rock pool delights at Flinders and I would like to continue to see these pools thrive and others revive.

My friends tell similarly, sad stories about the changes in the environment when snorkelling at Williamstown, but that is their story to tell.

My point here is that the natural world can appear to be abundant, endless, regenerative and alive yet it can easily disappear, in other words, become extinct. All that is left is a lifeless, dull world unless we understand, educate and put systems in place to look after our wildlife, plants and waters.

My concerns about extinction are embedded in my lived experienced and confirmed by the figures I read in the news: The Andrews government does not have a strong commitment to our natural world, it came to the last election without a strong environment policy. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia and still native vegetation is being cleared; over 700 native plants, animals, birds, plants, insects and fish

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are on the brink of extinction; more than 70 threatened species live in bushland that is still being logged; and the bushfires just magnify it all.

The bushfires earlier this year burned 1.4 million hectares in Victoria alone! More than 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and endangered Victorian animals (eg. the greater glider, smoky mouse), plants (eg. mountain ash eucalypts) and other creatures are now pushed perilously close to extinction.

I feel like weeping, so what to do?

I believe nature can recover with respect, strong protection and care.

COVID19 showed me how quickly the government could react to what they perceived as a crisis. It also showed me how my world and the ways we live in it could change so quickly when a crisis was explained and taken seriously. Immediate, swift and determined actions were taken and Australia has benefited from that. We are still struggling with the on-going fall out from COVID19, so we have an opportunity right now to keep this momentum going by creating jobs and prioritising the spending of public money to look after people, our community and the environment.

There are 4 areas I would like to see immediate action. These are:

1. A careful, environmentally sensitive, massive eradication programme of weed and invasive species.

The weeds and invasive animals kill and /or compete with our wondrous native species. We could create thousands of jobs clearing weeds from

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our rivers, creeks, farmland and national parks, and humanely manage introduced animals like cats, deer, rabbits and foxes.

2. A tree planting workforce to restore habitats.

67% of Victoria's trees, mangroves, shrubs, and other plants have been cleared since colonisation. Here again we could create thousands of jobs in the city and country areas across Victoria. People could be employed to replant trees and vegetation in our parks, streets, rivers and creeks and especially in bushfire affected areas. We could also help landowners plant native vegetation on their land.

3. A dedicated programme for reviving species facing extinction.

NSW has committed \$100 million over 5 years to the "Saving Our Species" programme which is a statewide program that aims to secure threatened plants and animals in the wild in NSW. It systematically identifies and registers species at risk and determines what to do to help them. One of my favourite parts is the "Report Cards", an easily accessible way for anyone to see and keep track of exactly what flora and fauna are endangered and what efforts are being made on their behalf.

Victoria's more than 120 species at risk of extinction deserves a similarly dedicated programme. I would like to see Victoria create a similar programme and employ specialists in the field to study solutions to the extinction crisis.

4. Stronger, enforced laws protecting nature.

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Extinction of plants and animals has no chance if we keep damaging it, just like the tiny blue sea snails at Watson's Bay. We must be the adults who say it is no longer okay to trample nature.

I would like to see an increase in:

Plantation based timber industry on already cleared land and an end to the logging of native forests;

Committing to sustainable energy practices and research while we phase out coal and gas exploration and burning;

Stronger, enforceable laws that honour the uniqueness of our flora and fauna;

Developments that enhance our environment and community and an end to unnecessary developments like the Western Highway duplication and the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal which continue to erode the health of Victoria's environment in favour of corporate profits.

I hope I have been able to convey to you why this issue is so important to me and what I hope to see established in response to an extinction emergency. I am asking you to be the responsible adult conveying the message: do not trample our environment because once it's gone, it's gone.

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If there is anything here that may be helpful to share with others I am happy for you to do so.

I look forward to seeing the results of this inquiry.

Sincerely yours,

Michelle Fox

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