

Nina Earl

phone: [REDACTED]

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Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Victorian Government

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Dear Legislative Council

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

As a conservation volunteer in the City of Kingston, I help conserve local flora and fauna reserves of Mordialloc Catchment with Council (three reserves, two for Melbourne Water) plus Bradshaw Bushland Reserve in Mordialloc. And I advocate on conservation matters directly or through local, national and global conservation groups.

My comments on this enquiry are grouped under the Terms of Reference headings.

Terms of Reference

On 30 October 2019 the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Environment and Planning Committee to inquire into, consider and report, within 12 months, on the decline of Victoria's ecosystems and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species, including but not limited to —

Response. However this inquiry came about, thank you. It is urgent and very necessary with global warming affecting land and waters, and with population growth driving the clearing of land for development or changed land use, all because our environment laws allow it and because economic ideology ignores environmental impacts. It is essential that:

- The population carrying capacity of Victoria's natural land and water environments is assessed, along with available water supply for people and agriculture plus infrastructure and building needs;
- Protection of, and impacts on, natural environments has priority over economic measures;
- Protection into the future of native ecosystems and associated species is firstly secured and secondly expanded, and that protection does not further decline;
- Habitats are both restored and ecologically connected to allow transitory and migratory species of native flora or fauna to disperse, move, forage, settle, shelter, rest or reach breeding grounds.

(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;

Response, as follows:

- Climate change is a 'silent' factor in ecosystems decline and is best referenced first;
- The wording focus on people '...likely impact on people...' is part of the problem, because it reinforces the notion that people have priority as the most deserving of species.
- Convey, please, that all lifeforms including people are supported by and dependent upon healthy ecosystems and their environmental services, healthy biodiversity levels and interdependent relationships between species, including 'pesky' insects, animals or plants.

(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;

Response. The legislative framework clearly does not offer adequate protection of Victoria's natural environments, as species, communities and ecosystems are disappearing, cleared, becoming depleted or altered because legislation allows it, or is not acted upon, or is absent:

- Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 was reviewed in 2009 and found lacking in key biodiversity 'guarantee' or protection then. Reform of the Act passed in the Victorian Parliament on

29 August 2019, but whilst the paper Act talks of protection and has threatened species listed actual ecosystem decline is still occurring;

- The recently weakened Native Vegetation Clearing Rules further advance the loss of or compromise to ecosystems and associated species:
 - Less restrictions on native vegetation removal on public and private land for building development or infrastructure;
 - The offset principle for removal of remnant native vegetation is poor compensation for loss of original species and natural recruitment of species and any habitat lost with them. Transplanted or propagated species are no longer remnant, it is difficult to replicate the exact conditions that supported remnant vegetation thus some transplanted or propagated species fail, and genetic stock may be compromised or genetic diversity may be decreased that then weakens the genetic pool and exposure to diseases and pests;
- Plant communities of salt marshes, grassy wetlands, native grasslands, Coast Banksia Woodland and Lowland Snow Gum are rapidly disappearing. So too, Victorian coastal plant communities and habitats from climate impacts and development pressure, enabled by the native vegetation offset system for removal of coastal vegetation, even remnants, for cafes and leisure facilities that increase pressure on coastal environments.

(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding, protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;

Response. Environmental legislation in Victoria must be strengthened to:

- Better protect, restore and/or expand and connect ecosystems, communities and species;
- Disallow gas extraction, disallow mining or any other resource exploration or extraction in natural areas on land or in waters;
- Apply to all public and private sectors with no exemptions for industry, agencies, corporations or others;
- Ensure recovery plans for threatened species are determined, funded and begun for critically endangered species, followed by endangered then vulnerable, thus reducing the number of species most at risk;
- Ensure minimal or no native vegetation loss; vegetation offsets are a last resort and within the vicinity of native vegetation to be removed and in like conditions, rather than within a catchment but remote to a site of removal;
- Ensure a significant percentage of natural areas remain protected and undisturbed, and that significant natural areas are 'no go' zones for people and their leisure machines.

(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;

Response. Climate change is a significant factor in ecosystems decline:

- The warmer, dryer or moister areas due to climate change is altering ecosystems and their extent and biodiversity levels, and facilitating movement of indigenous or pest species from changed conditions. Some examples:
 - Alpine areas are shrinking;
 - Coastal areas and river banks are being eroded;
 - Land and infrastructure inundated;
 - Indigenous or pest species moving from their natural range, such as native Citrus Gall Wasp *Bruchophagus fellishas*, usually present in NSW native Finger Limes, has spread south in milder winters to exotic citrus fruit trees in Victoria.
- Peoples' choices of consumption, use of fossils fuels, population growth and development that drives the rise in carbon emissions and thus altered climatic conditions—warming and drying, unseasonal weather variations, winds and storm surges, and sea-level rise;

- Carbon emissions must be reduced, and quickly, by adopting renewable energy—solar-powered homes, industries, vehicles and transport; sensible orientation of and passive heating and cooling of buildings; and incentives for energy efficiencies and to reduce consumption and packaging;
- Fossil fuel extraction and exploration must cease now, including on- and off-shore oil and gas projects and especially coal-seam gas extraction or fracking—to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and fugitive gas emissions that greatly contribute to gas emissions overall from leaking pipes and equipment ignition in industry or domestic cooktops, water heaters, gas heating, and more;
- Fossil fuel use must be phased out by better public transport reach and services, cycling-friendly communities, energy storage devices;
- Greater disincentives or controls on flora or fauna trafficking of outgoing Australian native species and incoming exotic/pest species;
- Greater controls, disincentives or education on people discarding unwanted flora or fauna species in natural environments or releasing species for later harvesting, for example, carp in local waterways.

(e) opportunities to restore Victoria’s environment while upholding First Peoples’ connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria; and

Response: Environmental restoration and employment can be achieved by:

- First Peoples being given the opportunity to be ‘on country’ to advise on biodiversity restoration or to discover their heritage in helping to restore biodiversity anywhere—terrestrial, aquatic, marine environments—public and private land and waters, rural, semi-rural, biodiverse pockets along coasts and in urban, suburban and peri-urban areas;
- The Living Links projects initiative of the Dandenong Valley Catchment—to create green corridors for habitat and recreational links in partnership with local authorities, businesses and Friends groups—is supported and expanded to other Catchments;
- Funding for environmental care apprenticeships.

(f) any other related matters.

Response. Better public education about the native ecosystems, communities and species of the natural environments of Victoria—environmental information beyond pollution and litter:

- Native ecosystem services that we all depend upon; soils, ecosystems, biodiversity and the interdependency between species explained;
- The difference between local natives and Australian natives;
- The importance of insects to the wildlife food chain and to pollination of crops and garden produce;
- Planning controls on unnecessary or excessive night lighting—uplights, downlights, spotlights, floodlights, flashing lights, feature or entertainment lights—to reduce insect kill, lessen disturbance to nocturnal and diurnal animals, retain or improve visibility of the night sky for wildlife navigation and for astronomers and people to observe and enjoy the night sky. And any necessary lighting to be insect-friendly please;
- The horticultural industry encouraged to promote indigenous and Australian plants rather than showy exotics;
- Landscape plans for public or private property required to prioritise local and Australian natives rather than introduced or exotic species;
- Educational institutions and all forms of media encouraged to show images of Australian landscapes and native species rather than foreign landscapes and species, so that children, students or adults learn first about Australia and secondly about other places;
- Migrants encouraged to appreciate Australian landscapes and species, rather than replicating their homelands in gardens and introducing potential invasive species.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. My contribution is less informative and comprehensive than intended, due to disruptive and unresolved NBN outages during this month. Nevertheless, I trust my comments show that ecosystem decline matters to me and to the future of natural environments in Victoria.

Otherwise, I support the submissions to this inquiry of Environmental Justice Australia and the Victorian National Parks Association.

Yours faithfully,

Nina Earl

Member of City of Kingston Public Spaces and Environment Advisory Committee;

Active Friend of Mordialloc Catchment (Mordialloc Creek, Yammerbook Nature Reserve, Epsom Grassy Wetland) and Bradshaw Bushland Reserve;

Member of Mordialloc-Beaumaris Conservation League, Kingston Conservation and Environment Coalition, Friends of Braeside Park, Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands, Kingston Residents Association, Australian Conservation Foundation, Environmental Justice Australia.