

INQUIRY INTO BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND ECOSYSTEM DECLINE

Imagine, the perfect picture of serenity and beauty. Listen, to the families of birds and other animals chirping, feeding and waking. See, a beautiful lake with the sun rising over the water and reflecting striking colours, watching wings flapping, water splashing and families nurturing and playing. Then be aggressively bombarded with hundreds of loud and obnoxious gun shots wiping out all of this beauty within seconds, literally towards extinction.

This is not only cruel to animals, but the destructive ability of humans who do not respect wildlife, ecosystems, nature, earth and our future. This is duck shooting, a so-called sport that is greatly responsible for killing native, protected and endangered species of birds all over Victoria. Now this for me is not imaginary as it may be for many. This is my experience, protesting at some of the wetlands of North and Western Victoria. This is one example of the reality and threat of biodiversity loss and ecosystem decline in our state.

After many years of general awareness, the ecosystem decline and biodiversity loss issue pressed my attention in 2014 with great urgency when friends of mine were advocating to protect the Great National Forest Park. This is where they declared the Lead Beaters Possum as critically endangered. Following from there in 2016 whilst working as a Case Manager in Child Protection, one day I drove back to Melbourne from the west of Victorian country. I witnessed first-hand many small and large significantly or completely dried out lakes, abandoned properties, farms and destroyed land where there once were thriving ecosystems for many kilometres ahead and beyond.

Onwards, I have also seen first-hand the cesspools and the run offs that appear settled and common around farms and abattoirs. Abattoirs right next to rivers or creeks where waste and run off pollutes ecosystems. I have seen people swim in those very same polluted waters. A clear correlation where the disregard and disrespect for our nature and the animals within can become a public health risk or emergency. COVID- 19, is a classic example of biosecurity risk that comes from how we treat animals who are an integral part of biodiversity and our ecosystems.

Gobsmacked that our government is not taking climate change and the treatment of animals and environmental destruction seriously enough. I have advocated for our environment by speaking up in many places such as Victorian and Geelong Trades Halls, local councils, radio stations and as one of the key organisers in protests around Victoria. At Surf Coast Shire Council, I have teamed up with others and spoken about community concerns regarding a new intensive goat dairy farm in Inverleigh, where the local community

expressed grave concerns relating to environmental pollution, species extinction, public health and ethics.

I am now embracing a new journey in political advocacy with the Animal Justice Party, where I have decided to run for the local council elections in Collier Ward of Knox City Council. Here we are also facing a number of concerns regarding biodiversity and ecosystems. The destruction of Lake Knox and the lack of sustainable and humane animal management strategies in the east of Melbourne suburbs appear to be hot topics at the moment. According to Professor Rob Fowler: "We need a 'next generation' suite of environmental legislation that embraces emerging trends in environmental management, that reflects international best practice and provides for a coordinated and effective approach to environmental regulation across the Australian continent." In order for this to happen we need forward thinking, progressive, rational and compassionate politicians and decision makers.

"Australia leads the world on extinction, with the highest number of mammals declared extinct since European settlement", according to 'Places You Love', an alliance of Environmental Organisations who are heavily informed by a panel of experts on Environmental Law. The Federal Minister of Environment and Energy at the time declared in the Guardian (February 2018) that 503 animal and 1,308 plant species are listed as threatened. Since then it is of popular knowledge that we have also lost a billion animals in the latest bushfires in NSW and Victoria combined. According to Victorian Resources Online from the Agriculture Victoria government website, you will find that more than half of Victorian land use is for primary production or is mostly agricultural land. This doesn't include other forms of land use that are also responsible for deforestation, pollution and habitat loss. As a result of this, it is safe to assume that by logic countless amounts of ecosystems have been destroyed and are lost forever and it's only getting worse.

According to the Independent review of Timber Harvesting Regulation Report (October 2018, page 3), "As Victorians we all value our native forests – for the economic, biodiversity, recreational and cultural values they provide..." and "There is an inherent tension and, at times, conflict between often competing interests. Balancing these values and activities presents significant challenges for policy-makers and regulators alike." Tell me, what is the economy, recreation and culture without biodiversity? This to me seems to be an issue of negligence or the inability to prioritise issues appropriately which then leads to conflict and more problems down the road. Ultimately, they are not equal. Biodiversity holds more value than any of the others, because they would not exist without biodiversity. When our

environment is destroyed, we will have no culture, economy or recreational activities to celebrate.

It is also known that The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning are aware of the threatened species list. As I keep researching, it is clear that the government has enough information about the biodiversity loss and ecosystem decline. So why are we still facing serious concerns regarding this issue? Why are we not seeing constant and consistent practices and actions executed by the government to address this issue appropriately? It appears that knowledge here isn't the main concern, but rather the lack of prioritising and taking appropriate action. Even though many relevant recommendations, best practices and legislative work generally acknowledge the importance of biodiversity and related issues, it just needs to be put into practice effectively. As it is evident by the examples, data and facts provided, and many more not mentioned, this is barely happening nearly enough.

As someone who is solutions and problem solving focussed, I am confident that this is an issue that can be prevented and has many solutions. There are many resources such as reports and recommendations involving the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems that can be referred to online. Referring to legal and scientific experts such as the Australian Panel of Experts on Environmental Law via The Places You Love Alliance, could help guide politicians and decision makers into the right direction. Just to mention a few, groups like this call for new and reformed legislations that will protect wildlife and habitats, and a National Sustainability Commission that develops appropriate plans that will help enforce legislations and will be authorised to enforce environmental laws too. Towards the end of the latest bushfire crisis, according to an article in The Guardian (January 2020), titled "More than 100 threatened species hit hard by Australian bushfires, pushing many towards extinction": Hundreds of scientists pushed for laws to be strengthened to assist the species extinction emergency and many conservation groups called for an ongoing review of related Acts and legislations.

According to the Independent review of Timber Harvesting Regulation Report (October 2018, page 5); "Traditional Land Owners are deeply connected to Victoria's forests through their cultural heritage and practices." Therefore, consultation about the natural environment and care for the land should be a combined effort between First Nations People and Environmental Scientists. We often hear about how nature should have its own right to thrive and be protected and how Indigenous caretakers know how to have a respectful relationship with the natural environment. This is possible, there are countries such as New Zealand, Bolivia and the USA who have Rights of Nature Laws. The Australian Centre for the Rights

of Nature have stated that natural laws afford us the ability to legally defend our natural environment. They help us change the way we see and treat our environment and the animals within. The ability to protect our natural environment will address so many key issues that are long overdue that deeply connect the rights of humans, nature and animals.

To conclude, it is quite clear that there are not strong enough laws in place and action taken to protect our natural environment and all that it encompasses. It is also evident that the government is aware of the significance of the situation, yet fail to address concerns as warned by many concerned First Nations People, scientists and members of the public. The lack of prioritising the wellbeing of the earth that we all inhabit is a key issue and reflects the lack of integrity in our leadership in this country and in Victoria. It is time that we do the intelligent and compassionate thing and start looking after each other better and work towards restoring our ecosystems, and we rely on the government to do exactly this. I hope that decision makers and politicians in parliament and in government will step up and address this issue appropriately before it is too late.

Kindest regards,

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