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Inquiry into Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Decline

I work in the Conservation and Land Management sector. I work throughout the Dandenong Ranges as well as along some coastlines in the Northern Western port region. My job is to protect and enhance the natural environment. I chose this job because I love being in nature, I love a challenge and I want to protect our remaining remnant landscapes and beautiful, vitally important native animals. My experiences working out in the bush in many different landscapes, along with last summer's bushfire have me extremely concerned about Australian wildlife and their habitat. It is for this reason that I am making this submission – I cannot sit idle and watch the animals be driven to extinction and the most magnificent forests be destroyed.

My understanding of this review is to:

1. understand the impact and enormity of the decline of biodiversity in Victoria
2. the adequacy of the laws protecting the Victorian environment
3. the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems
4. mitigating climate change impacts
5. opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

Some of the current issues we face are:

- The industrial revolution and subsequent consumerist economic system follows the philosophy of anything being justified in the acquisition of wealth. This means animals, habitat, natural resources and First Nations heritage sites have been destroyed with impunity
- Animal agriculture has developed in industrial proportions, with Australians eating more meat than ever before and as a result, factory farming is common practice. This poses enormous threat to the climate crisis as well as the destruction of forests and ecosystems and the extinction of many endemic species. Animal agriculture in Australia emits ~50% of all greenhouse gases when projected over 20 years
- Animals are seen as a means to make money through farming, gambling and shooting. There is no consideration for the effect our actions have on the environment and the climate crisis
- Man's arrogant belief that he can correct imbalances within ecosystems has in fact caused greater damage instead: the introduction of rabbits, deer and foxes for hunting has had negative impacts on native wildlife and their habitat. Furthermore, the poisons used to get rid of these introduced species continue to wreak havoc on all living creatures, waterways, the health of the soil and the general environment
- Existing protective legislation is not effective and has never been seen to be monitored
- The belief that the destruction of ecosystems can be offset by planting trees and shrubs elsewhere is erroneous. Man cannot create a healthy ecosystem, nor can an ecosystem be replicated. Nature creates ecosystems and this takes many years or decades and is ever evolving

1: Victoria's Decline in Biodiversity

Our philosophy of the mighty dollar and jobs being given the highest priority and justifying the destruction of natural areas must cease. We share this earth with all living beings from micro-organisms, bacteria and viruses to unknown varieties of flora and fauna. Without a balanced environment we threaten our own species with extinction. This disregard for the natural environment has greatly contributed to the climate crisis which led directly to the worst summer Australia has seen.

Black summer was a direct result of our lack of care for the environment and the planet on which we live and which sustains us. The way in which fires are currently managed is woefully insufficient. Why do we not consult with Traditional land owners and follow their fire regimes which helped form the biodiverse rich landscape which we so carelessly degrade?

Resources are so inadequate that fire emergency services defend areas of human population or farmland and leave fires that are difficult to reach within forests, to burn themselves out. Naturally this causes great environmental and habitat loss and the suffering of many animals. I believe this is one of the reasons the black summer fires got so out of control.

It is essential the state and federal governments pool their resources, utilize the army and buy as many fixed wing aircraft as possible to fight future fire storms. These same fixed wing aircraft can be refitted and used as rescue missions during flood events as well. It is important our leaders recognize that the climate crisis needs every resource available or we will lose our most precious resource, the land which nourishes us, but also human lives.

With approximately 600,000 species of flora and fauna in Australia, about 100 are known to have gone extinct in the last 200 years. Today there are over 1,770 that are listed as threatened or endangered. Australia has the highest rate of vertebrate mammal extinction **in the world**. Extinction begins with biodiversity loss and ecosystem decline.

It is unacceptable that the world's biodiversity is under such intense pressures and stress which have caused a loss of so much biodiversity that has led to a Biodiversity Emergency (as recognised by scientists around the globe). The 2018 State of the Environment Report from Victoria's Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability was shocking:

- The status of 60% of the Biodiversity Indicators are rated as "poor"
- None are rated as "good"
- 51% of the Biodiversity Indicators are deteriorating and only 1 out of 35 had improved and that is Private Land Conservation.

The five drivers of extinction are all man made:

- Exploitation – hunting, mining
- Habitat loss
- Pollution – including the use of poisons to "manage" introduced species
- Climate change – exacerbated by animal agriculture
- Introduced species – these include animals exploited in the animal agriculture industry – causing the most destruction and a major cause of climate change

2: Adequacy of the laws and lack of funding to organisations aimed at protecting the Victorian environment

Last year I was lucky enough to work in the Barnbam Wetland, also known as the Cranbourne Swamp. It is a highly important wetland ecosystem located between the South Gippsland Highway and the Railway at Lynbrook. The Wetland has been defined by the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment as a biosite of National Significance due to its ecological integrity, the richness and diversity of significant flora and fauna species and the presence of rare and threatened flora species. The vegetation of the wetland is listed as a threatened vegetation community under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

The plant species found here have declined in extent from an original estimated area of 5000 hectares on the West Gippsland Plains to approximately 20 hectares today. This is absolutely disgraceful.

Unfortunately, my organisation only got a one off grant to do a few weeks work. More of a pathetic hand gesture to show 'something' was being done to 'protect' this vitally important wetland.

The reality of it is, the wetland is surrounded by development. Huge developments comprising of hundreds of houses which all look the same are rapidly encroaching on this wetland. Every day that I worked there I found building materials dumped by builders. Building materials that were polluting the wetland and killing native fauna that frequents the wetland. These builders are hired by the developers.

Why are the developers not ensuring their builders are not polluting this threatened vegetation community? Where is the independent authority monitoring this illegal activity? Why is there no funding to protect and enhance this vitally important wetland? Why do parks Victoria get minimal funding from council, why does local council not do more to protect this asset and almost every other critically endangered reserve? Why does the government not take any action to protect this wetland? Why is it the job of charity organisations, authorities such as Parks Victoria as well as small specialised bushland regenerators such as myself to apply for grants (which are not nearly enough for what is needed) to protect this threatened wetland community?

My frustration with all these questions is not only from this situation, almost every other site I work on has a similar theme - big business getting away with anything, small business having to work twice as hard to rectify their careless actions.

Additionally, I am a team leader in my field and am almost on minimum wage, why is conservation and land management so underfunded? Why is the Conservation and Land Management sector as a whole so underfunded? Why are employees in this field on such low wages when the tasks they perform carry high levels of risk? I use Chainsaws, I use Schedule 7 chemicals, I perform dangerous, repetitive work in dangerous environments. If I were to be injured at work I would need to be airlifted via helicopter. Yet I am on minimum wage picking up rubbish blatantly discarded by builders earning triple my salary. There are a lot of injustices in the current system surrounding Conservation and there needs to be some change!

With \$50 000 our small bushland team were able to plant 13 000 plants back into degraded areas of the wetland, we were able to conduct vital weed and erosion control measures as well as toxic rubbish removal in the hope to steer it back into some form of functioning ecosystem. The reality of it is however, we need 50 000 every single year to monitor whether our actions are having a positive effect and to make important changes along the way and build upon our actions each year, not to mention keep at bay the ever encroaching weeds and rubbish that threatens this ecosystem.

We need rigorous regulations to prevent developers from destroying existing ecosystems with the mind set of anything goes in the acquisition of wealth. Nature, animals, environments, habitats and ecosystems cannot speak for themselves but we cannot survive without a healthy planet. It is time to put the protection of animals and their habitat before the mighty dollar.

Some related topics include:

- The bulldozing of koala habitat by a farmer of animal agriculture in south-west Victoria shortly after the black summer fires, killed about 50 koalas that we know of.¹ The outpouring of anger and grief over this issue has been great. I sincerely hope the government listens to the people – their voters they represent. Destroying habitat has devastating effects and I sincerely hope that the farmer who committed this atrocity is severely punished since we know very well how vulnerable the iconic, endemic koala is, nationwide. I fear the perpetrator will get a mere slap on the wrists. It would be great to be proved wrong.

- Between 2016 – 2018, a farmer in East Gippsland killed 406 Wedge-tailed Eagles along with a kookaburra, ravens and a raptor, in the name of animal agriculture. His punishment: a mere 14 days in jail and a \$2,500 fine. This is not even a slap on the wrist! What kind of an example does this set? Is this the kind of message we want to convey to our younger generation? Imagine I went out and killed 406 Puppies because they destroyed my homegrown lettuce? Would I only get such a penalty?

I am disgusted, hurt, depressed and very angry that the law is so lenient when it comes to the killing of animals.

I am disturbed to note that despite suffering the worst bushfire season, those in power continue to log despite the outcry of environmentalists and First Nations groups who subsequently managed to stop the logging in some areas of Victoria². They are in fact doing the work the government should be doing. A Federal court ruling in May 2020 found VicForests had breached national environmental laws.

3. Adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems

As the above examples prove policies, plans, action statements and even the EPBC Act are not effective in protecting ecosystems. Those in power have been able to do as they will and later. This must change immediately. The people, who speak for the land and all of its inhabitants, must be heard.

The *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 Plan* makes mention of the Planning and Environment Act 1987, the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 and the Climate Change Act 2017 – certainly the first two mentioned Acts are outdated and urgently need to be reviewed and dramatically improved. The plan notes that “biodiversity management” includes ‘sustainable use of natural resources to be managed under appropriate legislation’.

¹ <https://time.com/5777362/australia-koalas-killed-logging-site/>

² <https://ncreview.com.au/2020/07/07/logging-shutdown/>

This is a dangerous statement since there really is no way of using natural resources sustainably – that is doublespeak for decorating the truth which is really habitat destruction. This speaks to my concern of a consumerist society that puts money before environment. It is a thought process that must change if we and our unique environment, are to survive.

Incorruptible laws must be created which are enforced and regulated by an independent regulator. The EPBC Act should demand extensive research and comprehensive data collection to better inform decision-makers on environmental and cultural aspects. A single, state-wide accessible (and ultimately a central nation-wide) database should be created to ensure a central, reliable source. Both research and the establishment of a central database will require funding but that should be found as a priority.

4. Mitigating climate change impacts

According to a report published in the International Journal of Climate Change, **animal agriculture is the largest contributor to greenhouse gases in Australia** – 50 per cent of our nations emissions come from animal agriculture.³

Methane emissions are well documented but we rarely speak about the other contributions to this crisis:

- Fertiliser for crops
- Petrol to run the trucks that transport these animals to slaughter
- Electricity to freeze the bodies uses vast amounts of fossil fuels
- Put all of this together and we are releasing huge quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere

According to Dr Barry Brook, Professor of Environmental Sustainability, University of Tasmania: “livestock emissions, on their own, will cause significantly more warming in the next 20 years than all our coal-fired power stations”⁴

Nitrogen and phosphorus are bi-products of animal agriculture and most of these harmful chemicals contaminate land and water worldwide. This is detrimental to wildlife, humans, sea life, killing fish, bees and is creating “dead zones” in the oceans as well as destroying our iconic and world heritage site, the Great Barrier Reef.

Factory farming will cause more pandemics. “When we overcrowd animals by the thousands, in cramped football-field-size sheds, to lie beak to beak or snout to snout, and there’s stress crippling their immune systems, and there’s ammonia from the decomposing waste burning their lungs, and there’s a lack of fresh air and sunlight — put all these factors together and you have a perfect-storm environment for the emergence and spread of disease,” said Michael Greger, the author of *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching*. He also said: “If you actually want to create global pandemics, then build factory farms.”⁵ This book was published in 2007.

In a drought stricken country we are limiting people to quick showers and not watering their gardens when the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that animal agriculture uses ⅓ of Australia’s water supply.

- For the good of human and environmental health it is imperative we reduce our carbon footprint by drastically reducing meat consumption. Plant based food products are a major source of income and are producing extremely healthy and tasty meals. There is simply no need for meat anymore.
- More needs to be done in early education systems to convey the truth that you do not need meat or dairy to be healthy and also how it is not only beneficial for humans to eat more plants but is even more beneficial for the environment. If ever there was a perfect example of a win win situation, this would be it!
- Far stricter regulations need to be put in place to reduce the bi-products of animal agriculture.
- Greater taxes need to be placed on the agricultural sector to compensate for their environmental damage
- Harsher punishments need to be given to those that treat animals inhumanely.
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<https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=animal+agriculture+is+the+largest+contributor+to+greenhouse+gases+in+australia&showAll=true>

⁴ <https://www.peta.org.au/issues/food/meat-environment/>

⁵ https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/4/22/21228158/coronavirus-pandemic-risk-factory-farming-meat?fbclid=IwAR2wmpLhLWr76_eqevaB772NH2WI6EUWIOLfPhCwxAYfvRitsvmNGXLpfi

5. Restoring Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

While the destruction of the 46,000 year old Juukan Gorge by Rio Tinto occurred in the Western Pilbara, this disregard for heritage sites is a common occurrence nation-wide. What is unbelievable is that nobody at Rio Tinto (a British company) lost their job and little has been done in the way of compensation. How can we compensate for the loss of a 46,000 year old sacred, historical, anthropologically and archeologically important site.

Even more horrifying is the fact that there was such total disregard for First Nations people that they were not even consulted about the use of this site. Aboriginal Heritage sites need robust protection through incorruptible legislation. Working together with First Nations people on improving our land management will first require a genuine acknowledgement of the Uluru Statement of the Heart.

With Nelson Mandela's release and subsequent Presidency, apartheid was successfully dismantled. This achievement was mainly due to his collaboration with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings; a world-wide first. This has since been replicated in many countries as the need to be heard and healed becomes crucial.

The Uluru Statement of the Heart asks for the establishment of a 'Makarrata Commission' which will be essentially an Australian truth and reconciliation commission. The Uluru Statement also asks for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution – this is the very least we can do to make reparation for the atrocities and shameful treatment these nations have endured.

A Makarrata Commission will be immensely beneficial to all Australians. Only once we have established some trust with the First Nations people could we collaborate successfully with them. Trust will take a long time to establish and in the meanwhile their knowledge and expertise in land management, bush food and cool burns is critical to the future of Australia.

National Geographic talks about 11 of the fastest growing environmentally friendly jobs such as:

- Rooftop food gardens in urban areas
- Water quality technicians
- Natural scientists
- Green builders – including earth ships and tiny houses
- Bio fuels⁶

Establishing First Nations' training and recruitment strategies such as the Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES)⁷ and promoting and supporting First Nations entrepreneurs is growing slowly but more can be done. We need to establish closer relationships with First Nations people and support them in the way they want us to, instead of telling them what they should want. We need to listen rather than tell – simply showing respect to people who continue to live within their environment rather than destroying it, is our lesson. Until Australia was colonized, First Nations people had cared for the land and its inhabitants and in this regard we can learn an enormous amount.

⁶ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/sustainable-earth/11-of-the-fastest-growing-green-jobs/#/55050.jpg>

⁷ <https://aes.org.au/>

Conclusion

We need to stop exploiting native animals, their habitat and First Nations' heritage sites and start protecting them as a priority, with the creation of powerful, incorruptible laws.

Our education system in schools, tertiary and other forms of learning must include a focus on healthy eating and the environmental costs of our food choices. Making factory farms illegal is a good place to start. Not only are factory farms cruel, they are disease-ridden places that will cause another pandemic – it is just a case of when, not if. Animal agriculture is exacerbating the climate crisis. It is imperative we change the way we eat as a nation.

We need to change the way we think of all animals and the importance they play in keeping the environment in a state of balance. Keeping the planet healthy should be our priority – or we will be creating our own extinction.

Managing introduced species with poisons or bullets has not worked. Poisons kill indiscriminately and degrade the environment. Funding research into alternative and effective solutions such as relocation and fertility control is urgently required.

Most current laws that should be protecting wildlife and habitat are ignored and are not monitored or regulated. Creation and implementation of powerful, incorruptible laws that are prosecuted is paramount.

The policy of “offsetting” needs to be abolished and all remaining ecosystems must be rigorously protected. Thorough data collection of existing ecosystems, threatened and vulnerable species and all species in all environments is urgently required and there should be one centralized state-based database.

Protecting all native species and their habitat is paramount and no amount of money should over-ride that.