

Submission: INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA

To the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning

The decline of our ecosystems is one of the most significant and urgent issues we face as a nation. The responses of individual States and Territories shape the future, which means we have terrific opportunities to enact and see positive change, depending on how we choose to invest – in human and economic resources, and our environment.

This submission expresses some of my concerns and desires based on research and extensive personal observations of change spanning more than two decades, especially focused on Melbourne's north-east Green Wedge and surrounding regions.

This submission also reflects the concerns of my family, and of many Indigenous Elders from several communities across Australia with whom extensive conversations have been shared. In the last 12 months I travelled extensively for a work-related project, visiting communities across Australia, from central north NSW to Cape York and central QLD, to NT and across WA. The profound concern of all was environmental degradation and the development of sustainable possibilities for a better future. Across the nation, there is an overwhelming and distressing contrast between areas that are largely undisturbed and appropriately 'managed', to ones that are degraded and poorly managed.

I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission on the basis that change will occur to ensure a healthy future for all.

The immediate need for effective action is extremely obvious – we see it as we look around local streets and back yards, paddocks, parks, and beyond. We also read about it in innumerable reports as they confirm that our biodiversity is in serious decline. This tells us that current systems of governance and community response are not effective enough, so we would be foolish to continue as we are.

The tendency for action to occur predominantly when crisis hits is a terrible indication of our priorities and tendencies. Such approaches must change – with government policy and systems reflecting this.

Appropriate change will require courageous decisions made by a government that holds the well-being of the earth above that of short-term gains, whether financial, political, or other.

We cannot ignore the direct links between ecosystem decline and climate change – an 'issue' in need of immediate and strong action as described by many – including the Australian Department of Defence.

While our reliance on ecosystems is often cited as good reason for action, we must take heed and acknowledge that all forms of life also have basic rights to exist and thrive, regardless of the 'services' they provide for us. Ensuring their vitality, abundance and greater connectivity over much larger areas must be the foundation that informs *all* decisions through *all* levels of government.

Along with significant political transformation, greater public awareness and understanding relating to all aspects of our ecosystems and their conservation need to become commonplace. Plenty of information is available to guide all of us – action is overdue and must be encouraged.

Extensive documentation describes the numerous and severe pressures on plants, animals, soils, waterways, bacteria, and all other elements that make up our ecosystems. None exist in isolation. Countless issues and solutions are well known and have been known for a very long time. We cannot afford to further delay effective action. While we delay, loss continues and damage becomes harder to halt and remediate, as the flow-on effects of long-term negligence are still becoming apparent. We are yet to see the full consequences of the decline and loss of species, the significant reductions of insect

populations, the effects of extensive chemical use, the presence of plastics and other contaminants in the oceans, dramatic alterations and impacts in waterways, and so much more.

Below are just a few of many areas where much stronger legislation needs to be developed and APPLIED. Importantly, incentives and enforcement measures must better ensure this takes place. While there may be public opposition – even to solutions that are simple and known – this opposition is largely due to a lack of awareness or vested interests. These cannot be ongoing excuses for inaction.

The government also has a responsibility to ensure all residents and visitors are aware of, and well versed with, the current situation, the extent of the problems, diverse causes and consequences of action and inaction. It is essential - regardless of popularity - if we are to achieve a reversal of decline. Australians love their comforts and we rarely consider the true consequences of our lifestyles (luxurious when compared to most of the world's population). Difficult conversations are essential, and everyone's responsibility (including Government) to instigate these and participate in mature and informed ways.

Invasive plants

- Victoria's ecosystems feel the pressure from innumerable introduced plants. Many, such as Bridal creeper, gazania, thistles, asparagus fern, exotic grasses, and so many more, cause immense damage to ecosystems and cost the Victorian economy more than \$900 million each year.
- The sensible notion of 'prevention is better than cure' needs to be embraced and consistently acted upon. Impacts from invasive plants are often overlooked, can happen slowly but steadily, and are often very difficult to reverse once established.
- Legislation and enforcement for the control and elimination of such plants are obviously weak and ineffective – today, we see great tracts of country dramatically transformed, often from high quality native vegetation that provides habitat and nourishment for native animals, to weed infested, low-quality habitat that has lost biodiverse complexity. Flow on effects are varied and extensive, including the depletion of native seed banks, reduction of food availability for native animals (which also causes further disruptions to the complex food chain), degradation of waterways, potential significant increase in the intensity and spread of fires, ongoing financial burden, and much more.
- We cannot continue to apply poisons for the control of weeds, whether in school yards, sporting fields, roadsides and rail tracks, food crops, waterways, or forests. Not only are these poisons harmful to humans, but they are applied (or inevitably end up) in areas where countless animals feed and drink, breed and care for their young.
- Impacts are being increasingly seen and will, in time, become even more apparent. All chemicals that pose risks must be avoided, regardless of what manufacturers claim, as we must learn from extensive and current research and international activity. Legal battles have shown that the precautionary principle ought to be applied. We need much smarter – therefore sustainable - ways of working, and support needs to be given to such research and its widespread application. The benefits of investing in research, labour, and equipment, far outweigh the long-term costs of chemical use – from their manufacture to their application and beyond.

Urban growth

- We must better manage urban growth. It is distressing to see the rapid loss of important grasslands, woodlands, and other ecosystems. Flora and fauna they sustained vanishes or becomes severely restricted, declining in number and health. Old trees with nesting hollows are increasingly rare.
- Perceptions of environmental values need to be heightened, and in support of this, powerful regulations must be developed, communicated, and applied.
- We need a brave Government to make changes that demand truly sustainable urban planning. This would necessarily include conservative use of resources; reductions in urban sprawl and strict adherence to urban growth boundaries; retention of native vegetation as key priority; sustainable modes of connecting communities that do not rely on cars; local generation of power from latest

technologies that do not include the extraction of resources which are known to bring unwanted consequences such as those from coal, gas and uranium; and more.

- Australia has some of the largest houses in the world – completely unnecessary yet entirely allowed because of our perceptions of land whose true values are disregarded. Along with extensive public information, we need stringent building codes that demand efficient buildings and low impact materials; construction methods that minimise harm to the environment; appropriate recycling and disposal of ALL materials used in the process – from manufacture to end of life. Manufacturing and construction companies must be held to account so they can no longer pollute local environments, inappropriately dispose of excess or old materials, and utilise inefficient technologies
- Requirements to regenerate indigenous vegetation must ensure diversity, long term survival, and compensate for any loss. While offsets are at times appropriately used, too often they are an excuse or green light for destruction. This must change.

Resource use

- Legislation must be developed and applied that will see a dramatic change in how various resources are valued and utilised. Much stronger action needs to be implemented: one small example is the banning of single use plastic bags, which have too often been replaced with much heavier plastic bags. Some of these are re-used a few times, some not at all. This is not a solution. The same applies to bags which claim to be 'biodegradable' – and marketed as a positive product – even though much of the time it simply means that the plastic breaks down into smaller pieces at a faster rate than standard bags. This is not a solution.
- Legislation and extensive campaigns to build community awareness are essential. Simple actions can achieve significant gains, for example redesign packaging of various products from food to whitegoods and tools; reduce use of single-use plastic cups, cutlery etc.; require food outlets to move away from polystyrene/plastic containers and wrapping – whether takeaway, bakeries, grocery stores; reduction of consumption and waste, even if perceived to be detrimental to a capitalist financial system; recycling of all resources/items; responsible pet-ownership. This is a tiny list of countless opportunities for change.
- Develop and make effective and widespread use of efficient recycling systems.

Feral and domestic animals

- Animals such as deer, pigs, goats, rabbits, horses, cats and foxes cause immense damage to flora and fauna, waterways and soil health. Much stronger action is necessary to reduce their extensive impact.
- It is well known that cats cause immense destruction to native wildlife, and obviously, current systems of control are not strong or effective enough. While legislation that addresses these issues may be unpopular, it is clear that here in Australia, we urgently need stringent controls.
- Partnerships with different organisations can be better developed and applied for the control of ferals.

Agriculture

- Australia's agricultural practices need to change – innovative approaches that retain and reinstate diverse indigenous vegetation need to be supported in various ways, and must include the education of farmers as well as the general population.
- Farmers who are taking positive action and seeing the benefits of their efforts [ie improvements in biodiversity and retention of healthy soil] need to become ambassadors for the industry. We cannot continue with the old mentality of farming equating to monocultures that require significant inputs, pastoral systems that dramatically reduce the abundance and diversity of indigenous vegetation, and water extraction that bleeds waterways dry, leading to devastating effects far and wide.
- We need to reconsider our roles as custodians of land, rather than owners who can leave a terrible legacy. We need to consider the particular qualities of each area, the indigenous flora and fauna that

have evolved to survive specific conditions, and honour Indigenous knowledge that leads to new opportunities for communities in employment, research, and more.

Land clearing

- Must STOP!
- The many devastating and long-term impacts of land clearing are well known. No more studies are needed. No more allowances can be made.
- Victoria needs to establish much better regulations, strict controls and severe penalties for businesses and individuals who clear native vegetation.
- We can learn from many countries around the world and actively plant great numbers of trees (suitable native species) for the use of their timber in construction, manufacturing, for firewood etc. We must make such plans with care for the environment and consideration for generations to come.

Indigenous knowledge

- Knowledge grown from long-term observations needs to be respected and partnerships established to enable human dignity, prosperity and cultural vitality, while ensuring environmental health.
- Well-informed, planned AND responsive use of fire through the country needs to be applied to ensure terrific diversity of ecosystems and their greatest regeneration and resilience. Appropriate use would also see a significant reduction of the risks Victoria faces every 'fire season'.
- Extensive use of indigenous plants that provide food, medicine and various resources, must be one of our significant investments. These are better suited to local conditions, and would lead to great reductions in the use of chemical inputs and damage to soils, and the development of systems that support native animals and provide decent opportunities for employment and lifestyles that replenish the country rather than deplete it. It is vital that Indigenous communities are appropriately supported.
- The same applies to animals – native animals do not have hard hooves which cause compaction and a myriad of other issues, and graze differently on the country. We need much more support to be given to a transition away from cattle and sheep, toward other animals such as kangaroos. This must all be done with greatest respect for the creatures and the environment which supports them.

Of great significance is how we emphasise the absolute dependence of human health and economic prosperity, on environmental health. This must become part of everyday thinking and decision making.

Australia is in a terrific position full of opportunities – IF we choose to take a different path to the one that has led to widespread ecosystem decline. We cannot continue as we are – the evidence is clear. Decline needs to be addressed, and Victoria can have a prosperous future that grows from biodiverse vitality. Without it, a sameness will pervade much like every other urban environment. Our ecosystems and our relationships with and within them are our greatest assets by every possible measure. Our legislation must reflect and honour this.

As stated in the interim Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), "The EPBC Act is ineffective. It does not enable the Commonwealth to protect and conserve environmental matters that are important for the nation. It is not fit to address current or future environmental challenges."

This same sentiment is reflected in innumerable papers – independent reviews, scholarly research, government reports, Indigenous ranger reports, and so much more. We need action!

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