

Submission to

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA Environment and Planning Standing Committee – The
Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee August 2020

Inquiry to examine measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species:

(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;

I am deeply worried about the decline in Victoria's biodiversity. Numerous reports, and public submissions to those reports, plus scientific research, have documented its decline. I find there is widespread anxiety about this decline.

State of the Environment Reports, Land Conservation Council and Victorian Environment Assessment Council Investigations document the entire state, individual and team efforts such as Dr David Lindenmeyer's and others work on particular areas, ecosystems such as on the Mountain Ash, Government Department research, work on the ecosystems of the endangered south eastern red tailed black cockatoo, the mountain pygmy possum, the greater glider, forest owls, grassy woodlands et al are all available to back up the protection measures we need.

One example of decline: personal example

Adjacent to some land I have protected in far western Victoria, under a Trust for Nature Covenant, is a state forest where the nationally endangered Red-Tailed Black-Cockatoo frequently found food. The birds, having an extremely limited diet of brown and desert stringy bark and buloke seeds, also used my place. Flocks of 20 or 40, once even 80, were present over the years. Not any more.

Since very, very hot planned burns that reached the tree canopy in 2010, and were repeated in 2018 in the nearby state forest, the stringybarks, that take anything from 10 to 13 years after a hot canopy burn to start producing suitable seed for the cockatoos, have been unable to do so. Now I see, if lucky, perhaps 2 or 3 of these declining birds.

In this one example in south west Wimmera vegetation has declined- as well as in other neighbouring areas- and an endangered species has lost scarce food sources. In addition, the old hollow-habitat trees have been killed in the very large, hot burns, so hollows for nesting birds and homes for other species such as antechinus have gone.

In the terms of this inquiry what are we to do? What measures to restore this habitat? I would strongly recommend, in relation to decline caused by such planned burning, the planning for and beginning immediately of cool, small, slow, low in height, well below the canopy indigenous method burns in the state forest in question. And also, for other ecosystems in western and central Victoria, and their populations of threatened and endangered species, instigate indigenous cultural fire management, informed by climate change science.

****I strongly recommend the planning for and beginning immediately cool, small, slow, low in height, well below the canopy indigenous burns in the forests**

On a larger scale to protect ecosystems in climate change we need a change to having state and national highly trained teams of people who can go in immediately to the ignition point of a fire: while the fire is small.

Teams will need ground training, be highly mobile, strategically located to serve with aircraft able to move as emergencies arise. In this context Victoria needs to work closely with the Commonwealth Government which in turn needs to invest in resources such as fleets of planes and equipment working closely with the states to protect both people and ecosystems.

Ancestor Trees: Victoria has lost large old trees on an immeasurable scale and to halt this decline and for the health of First Peoples it is imperative to stop the destruction whether it be in forests, woodlands , grasslands or roadworks – the latter needing to find alternative routes for roads.

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

As stated above we are in serious need of an independent authority for enforcement of laws in Victoria. Not only in Victoria but at both State and Federal levels.

Over three decades of personal environmental and conservation work I have been increasingly aware that laws for conservation and promotion of the health of ecosystems and species have had, and currently have, no teeth. Time and time again individuals or non government environment organisations have had to take up the work of protecting ecological values in danger of being lost.

Witness the current problem with the review of the EPBC (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act) where not only is there the denial of a critical need for an enforcement authority but, in addition, there seem to be moves to weaken and rush protection laws at the very time when nature in Australia is struggling – climate heating, bushfires, land clearing, native forest felling, weed invasion and widespread feral predation.

Unless the Victorian and Federal laws become more than nice sounding words in documents on shelves ‘measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species’ will not succeed. Victoria, and Australia as a whole, will continue to see ecosystem decline.

**** My strong recommendation to this inquiry is for an independent authority for enforcement of environmental /biodiversity/ ecosystem laws in Victoria and**

**** that the Victorian Government argue strongly for such an authority at the Federal Government level and also for national biodiversity laws – land and sea ecosystems do not coincide with state boundaries, nor does their health.**

Regional Forest Agreements have failed the forest ecosystems Victoria wide. This includes rainforests, which would be quite strong fire buffers if not for intrusive logging into them and felling of the forests around their edges such as is happening in Eastern Victoria. Logging destroys the protective, overhead canopy of tall mature and old trees and makes the native forests more fire prone.

Formerly quite common species needing older habitat, such as the Greater Glider, are currently on the decline. The Mountain Ash ecosystem is down to 1% intact. And we only have to look each evening at the TV weather maps to see how important Victoria's forests are to this ancient, mostly unforested continent.

****My strong recommendation, in the context of climate change, is therefore to end native forest logging immediately and not wait until 2030.**

As has already taken place in the Otways and Cobboboonee Forests just payment should be paid to all current native forest loggers (an industry far eclipsed in jobs by the plantation industry) and resources and personnel for the many jobs required to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species be made available. Besides ecosystem health carbon storage is an extra bonus of this measure.

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

- While achieving much, on the whole, programs in a time of climate change crisis need to be on a bigger scale e.g. fencing off large areas of ecosystems where deer, foxes and cats can be eradicated and species protected and bred until the state at large can aim to eradicate feral animals
- Make greater funding/resources available for serious long term measures of eradication of feral pests in Victoria. In a post covid19 world this would be an excellent source of jobs that would be longer than 2 or 3 years
- Pay landholders throughout the state, but particularly in intensive farming areas, to restore/revegetate creeks and rivers on their properties and fence them off (except for stock watering points) to provide, across the state, species lifelines as well as healthy waterways
- Noting some government programs do not have clauses to permanently protect the public grant money restored ecosystems - but merely for a few years - there needs to be a change so as not to waste valuable effort and resources.

d) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

Set about gathering and implementing the indigenous knowledge of land management of the first peoples of Victoria, some that is already in train, and indeed, from others already practising in Australia such as Victor Steffenson, see 'Fire Country'. This work will need to take into account the altered land, often remnants, since European settlement, as well as scientific knowledge of climate change

(f) any other related matter

****Recommend ending duck shooting in Victoria** because common species can become uncommon very quickly, the seasons are drier and wetland havens more unpredictable. As the recent fires have revealed feral animals are an ever more serious threat to our wildlife. It is therefore the moment in our history when hunters and shooters can, for the health of people and species, target feral animals, cats, foxes, deer and goats- which could satisfy both the hunt and provide food for themselves or for the needy.

I feel embarrassed I have not gone into more detail for this important Inquiry but do hope my points can be of support to those with greater expertise. Thank you for the Inquiry.

Geraldine Ryan

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