

The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne
Vic. 3002

Dr David Barton
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

27/8/2020

Ref: DBA200827

Submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Dedication:

This submission is dedicated to the memory of the life and work of Rita Bentley OAM, a tireless worker and advocate for the rights of all bush users, who battled cancer for 19 years and passed away in July 2020. Her never failing energy, work and achievements will long be remembered and are an inspiration to us all.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find as follows my submission to the Inquiry. Please note that this submission is not confidential and I am prepared to appear and make an oral presentation and answer questions at the Inquiry's discretion if required.

I believe it is time for some well overdue 'plain speaking' and 'truth telling' regarding what is really going on in the bush rather than the sham ideologically-based largely irrational propaganda we have now been subjected to and enduring for many decades. Indeed, the Victorian populace has been enduring dozens of fake so-called 'scientific' inquiries and studies, particularly from the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) with already pre-determined outcomes, most usually the creation of more parks, the exclusion of many recreational interest groups and the shutting down of many traditional industries, putting many people out of work. This has now been going on for over twenty years! It is time for all of this to stop! How can any civilised society make any real progress or operate successfully under such fraudulent conditions?

To begin with, I am very concerned from the outset about the apparent loaded agenda of this Inquiry, especially in relation to three matters:

1. The assumption that the ecosystem is in fact in decline.
2. The unwarranted emphasis upon 'First Peoples'.
3. The unwarranted emphasis upon 'climate change'.

There appears to be an assumption that there is an alleged overall and undefined 'decline' of ecosystems in Victoria, yet this has not been established. Where some decline has been noted, the real reasons for it seem to have been ignored or misattributed. In addition, there are so many other far more important, pertinent and concerning issues related to ecosystems in Victoria, so why the narrow and seemingly ideologically based Terms of Reference of this Inquiry? The alleged 'decline' of the last four decades cannot be attributed to either the lack of involvement in it by Aboriginal people, or the apparent advent of anthropomorphic 'climate change'.

I do not believe the ecosystem of Victoria to be in 'decline' at all, which would be to say it is on a gradual movement or slippery slope towards terminal eradication and extinction. This is not the case. Rather, the ecosystems of Victoria are 'damaged', and

in places very badly damaged. Nevertheless, ecosystems are resilient and can recover given good and proper management, which they currently show no signs of receiving. If our ecosystem does not soon receive proper care and management, then it will indeed fall into decline.

The second and third matters are dealt with in more detail below. In the main I will be addressing the issues of public land use, our forests, and in particular the forests of the 'High Country' of the Great Dividing Range, as that is where I have spent most of my time and where much of my experience and expertise lies.

About Me:

I am 64 years old and have spent much of my life living and working in the bush including brief stints in forestry and underground gold mining. During the late 1980's and mid-1990's I worked in the Victorian High Country around Aberfeldy and Woods Point and owned a property at Matlock for 25 years up until 2015. I also spent six years working in Central Australia on programs with and for Aboriginal people, and last year completed a two-month research project on the current state of affairs with Aboriginal people in the Centre. I am well versed in Aboriginal issues in both the Northern Territory and in Victoria, having followed and worked in these areas for almost 50 years.

After years in social work and community development, in the mid-1990's I started work as a contract lobbyist and activist at the Commonwealth and State level, principally regarding environmental management issues. In the early 2000's I was a foundation member of the original Bush Users Group (BUG), the Australian Environment Foundation (AEF) and of Game Conservation (GameCon), a group promoting hunting on public land. Years later I helped to re-establish the Public Land Access Council (PLAC) and have been involved in the new Bush Users Group United (BUGU) and the fight against the creation of a Great Forest National Park. Many of these ventures have come to nothing in the face of Green politicians, bureaucrats and well-funded Green lobby groups who have sought to advance the Green agenda to the detriment of both the bush and bush users.

In 2009 I lost my home, business, possessions and many friends in the Black Saturday fires which destroyed Marysville, and I received two Bravery Awards for my role with the State Emergency Service in rescuing people on that day. I was then intrinsically involved in the town's recovery and rebuilding, also completing a PhD on the subject in 2017. Over many years I have attained a number of Certificates and a Diploma of Youth Work, a Diploma of Community Development, a Bachelor of Counselling, a Master's in Sociology and a PhD in Disaster Recovery. I am currently a self-employed consultant. During the last 40 years I have amassed a great deal of experience and knowledge about the management of the bush, and have watched its steady deterioration in management terms over that time. It is time for that neglect to stop.

Background:

There are two main issues to be addressed in relation to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, being as follows:

1) 'First Peoples'

I am not entirely sure why there is such a focus upon 'First Peoples' in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Our current Victorian ecosystem 'decline', damage or

degradation is not caused because of any lack of management by Aboriginal people or because of ‘climate change’. The growing problems in the Victorian landscape, especially the bush, have been very evident for the last four decades, well before the advent of Aboriginal traditional primacy or the grand theory of climate change, and are primarily due to foolish and counter-productive restrictive Government regulation and a serious decrease in funding allocations and ‘on the ground’ staff to actually carry out works.

Funding for land and forest management is critical, yet I note that whilst funds for such management are chronically short, in the space of the two years 2018-2019 the 3,000 Taungurung people alone have received in excess of \$59.5 million dollars. I would ask who has received this money, and what are they doing with it towards landscape management?

Yes, funding is critical, yet along with the \$59.5 million given to the Taungurung, in addition to freehold title to tracts of land and buildings, a further \$13.1 million has been given in DELWP grants to Aboriginal organisations in the same period (See Appendix A) being a total of \$72.1 million dollars, not to mention all the bureaucratic public servant jobs associated with this new ‘Aboriginal industry’ which is now costing Victorians hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars, all money that is now not available for real work in managing and preserving ecosystems.

Indeed, the practice now of diverting funds away from proper care and management of the environment to Aboriginal organisations for staffing and administrative positions is hardly going to do anything to stem ecosystem damage or promote its repair. Imagine what \$72.1 million dollars could do by way of direct environmental repair if it was spent specifically on restorative work and regenerative programs.

What is of greatest concern is that the citizens of Victoria seem to be mostly kept in the dark about what is happening in this area, have little or no opportunity to comment on it and have no say at all in the outcomes, which will dramatically affect all of our use of Victorian land and bush. Why are we not told, asked our opinion, or allowed to have a say in this discussion?

2) ‘Climate Change’

Despite claims by many, the ‘science’ about climate change is definitely not ‘settled’. Claims of radical changes upon the earth have failed to materialise, and many weather occurrences are well within the scope of normal ranges. Overall, the temperatures have not in fact risen, and neither have the seas. There are many falsehoods being spread about these matters and it is probably the most hotly contested and widely debunked theory on the planet. The current effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is proof of what happens when there is a real world-wide crisis, not a pretend one.

Climate Change has been blamed for the terrible 2019-2020 ‘Black Summer’ fires, however, any claimed direct effects from ‘climate change’ are yet to be seen, and the recent fires have many other contributing factors than just ‘climate change’, most of which have been conveniently ignored. Indeed, respected forest management and fire experts Gary Morgan and Ewan Waller recently told the Federal government’s *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Bushfire)* that “if each of the states and territories had put into action effective land management plans, then Australia wouldn’t have had the fires that it has experienced” and “If people in each of the states and territories were able to enact the policy statement and put that into

their land management plans, then we wouldn't have the fires that we currently have now".¹ This is clear evidence (amongst much more) that mismanagement of our forests and other assets (like power lines) is responsible for the fires we have seen over the last decade, not climate change.

This mismanagement, grossly absurd rules regarding local vegetation management, all combined with the ever expanding peri-urban interface and more people living in the bush has far more to do with wildfires than 'climate change' ever will. In addition, the part that vested interest plays in the 'climate change' debate also cannot be underestimated, and indeed, when discussing the alleged decline in ecosystems, ideological vested interest, especially from the idiotic Greens, runs rampant.

Prophecies of the Australian bush and landscape being catastrophically destroyed because of anthropomorphic climate change remain fanciful and without evidence. It is therefore difficult to take this matter seriously in relation to any ecosystem decline that may have occurred over the last four decades.

Lastly, this Inquiry should not be used as a Trojan Horse vehicle to further destroy the timber industry, to further remove the rights of genuine bush users, to further advance the 'rights', power, control and finances of the new Aboriginal industry, or to further advance the power, control and finances of the new 'climate change' industry either.

Addressing the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

- (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;**

As noted above, is there in fact a 'decline' as claimed? I do not believe there is 'decline', but there is 'damage' and it is substantial in many places. The damage I have witnessed over the last 45 years is in the main due to wildfires along with weed and feral animal infestations. These three factors have been exacerbated by the poor and gradual disappearance of any real management, and increasing neglect during those same 40+ years. The cost-saving cheapskate 'lock it up and leave it' approach has seen no management at all of vast tracts of Victorian bush for decades, leaving it highly susceptible to complete destruction through wildfires.

In the second half of the 20th century, there used to be Forestry Commission Camps and Country Roads Board Depots in the High Country and other country areas where local workers were available to carry out the necessary management works on a daily basis. These camps and depots were all deserted and gone by the turn of the century, replaced by fewer workers at urban locations (spending vast amounts of paid time travelling) and a surfeit of university graduate city-based office workers with no real-life bush work experience whatsoever. Real work and management in the bush has all but ceased, with the bush now becoming something to be studied from a distant office rather than a lived experience.

Sadly, the ongoing deterioration of bush tracks due to poor maintenance and some idiot four-wheel-drivers has meant the closure of many tracks, rather than better

¹ <https://www.gippslandtimes.com.au/story/6861262/the-states-are-not-following-fire-management-policy/?fbclid=IwAR3C1E1tsdMzEutw0FLJ6YpCAOQXZyydZqDO2ODKAWzzVboKPITFt51dW58>

design, construction, maintenance, policing and education. The bush is out of mind to city-dwelling voters and politicians, so it can be the first place for cost cutting measures. The damage and decline of the bush has far more to do with poor management, neglect, defunding and over-regulation than anything else.

There has been some excessive land clearing in some areas of public land, and this should be better managed. Feral animals, being in the main cats, dogs, rabbits, foxes, and all species of deer, along with invasive Indian Myna birds, should be much better controlled, as should the spread of weeds, in particular, Blackberry, Scotch Thistle, Dandelion, Patterson's Curse, Ragwort and Capeweed. Management activity in these areas has all but disappeared in most areas, (it's all too hard and there's no money) with the land simply being closed off to public access.² However, I can see that on the present trajectory nothing will change and the de-facto 'lock it up and leave it' approach will continue, if for no other reason that there is no money (or desire) left in the public purse to actually undertake any effective works in relation to the above. Indeed, if nothing else, 21st century people are just too lazy to get out there and do it! A well-paid air-conditioned office job is a much easier and preferable option. Just think of how much effective pest animal and weed control could be carried out instead of the multi-millions of dollars spent on bureaucracy, or handed over to Aboriginal organisations, or wasted on 'climate change'. That is what would stop ecosystem damage and arrest ecosystem decline.

Regarding timber harvesting, eucalypts are essentially weeds and they grow back very quickly (and they never should be planted in highly populated urban areas). However, the flora and fauna understory biodiversity associated with eucalypt forests is not so easy to readily regenerate, and should be better protected. Forest harvesting has become problematic, not because the concept is intrinsically wrong, but, once again, because it too is being poorly managed along bureaucratic ideological lines. So much land is now closed to timber harvesting that it has for the last few decades been concentrated into ever decreasing smaller areas, meaning that its impact is more obvious and severe. This is a bad thing, and some areas such as the Rubicon State Forest have suffered unnecessarily as a result. This is a large and complex topic for this paper, but serious steps should be taken to address the myriad issues involved with this industry's sustainability, and shutting it down is clearly NOT the solution. This is simply the business equivalent of 'lock it up and leave it' because it's 'all just too hard', and the Green socialist political pressures are just too great to bear. This is rank abdication and cowardice of the part of a weak government.

The impact on today's 'First Peoples' of alleged ecosystem decline and actual damage is in reality negligible to non-existent. Indeed, why are Aborigines singled out in this matter at all? This inquiry should be far more concerned about the impact of current Victorian government land management policies on ALL Victorians, not just Aborigines. Indeed, some Aboriginal organisations are now being given control over areas they traditionally rarely visited. Many Aboriginal Organisations get more DELWP funding under the 'Local Government funding' criteria that actual local governments do. Yet what are these Aboriginal organisations doing with the millions

² Nevertheless, I note that by law private landholders are forced to undertake these works on pain of fines, even though government departments now seem somehow exempt.

of dollars they now receive to address the above-noted issues of fire, weeds, feral animals and track maintenance?

The real impact of the decline and damage is actually felt by others – those who live, work and recreate in the bush, mostly of which precious few are Aborigines. They are in fact thousands of ordinary Victorian country town residents, farmers, timber workers, miners, prospectors, bee keepers, hunters, four-wheel drivers, trail bike riders, horse riders, mountain bikers, skiers, bushwalkers, tour operators, etc. None of this has anything whatsoever to do with the absence of Aboriginal people in the landscape, or climate change. Indeed, in living and travelling extensively in many remote areas of Victoria, I have never in over 45 years ever come across an Aborigine (or a Green) living, working, or even camping in any of these High Country areas, yet they have never been prevented from doing so. So why are they not there?

Therefore, the so-called ‘impact’ on ‘First Peoples’ is exactly the same as the impact on everyone else, and that is the point. Today’s ‘Aboriginal’ people are little different to any of the rest of us. They live in homes, in suburbs and towns; for the most part they have jobs (now exclusively reserved for them), amounts of funding that most other community organisations can only dream about, and many are doing very nicely, and good luck to them. Yes, Aboriginal people have a traumatic history, but so do many, many others who receive no special considerations or benefits because of it.

How will DELWP in 2018-2019 giving \$13.1 million to Aboriginal organisations do anything to arrest any decline or damage to our ecosystems? Other than creating a new bureaucracy and a multitude of mostly pointless administrative positions to create new regulations to exercise control over the rest of the population’s access to the bush, yet meanwhile creating privileged access for themselves, how will any of this help our ecosystems? The billions of dollars now being given to Aboriginal organisations could in fact be much better used to actually manage the bush and to have real workers actually get out there and do some work!

The greatest contemporary threat to biodiversity is the shutting down of public land; the ‘lock it up and leave it’ approach is what will kill it. The Law of Entropy applies – if it is not used and well managed it will decay and burn. It is not the excluding of bee-keepers, prospectors, hunters, four-wheel drivers, trail bike riders, or horse riders, that will help save the bush – indeed, on the contrary, the exclusion of these activities and the management activities usually associated with them are what will help to destroy it.

It is this new era of confected white guilt, combined with historical revisionism, mixed with socialist ideology that will ultimately be to the detriment of our ecosystems and our wider population and joint future. Under this new ideology the extension of the peri-urban interface, the poor asset maintenance of power lines, urban sprawl and overpopulation, feral animals and weeds, the ignoring of good bushfire preparedness and practice, the lack of maintenance of bush roads and tracks, all these things barely get a mention under the combined mantras of ‘First Peoples’ and ‘Climate Change’, and of course, that’s where all the money is now going too! This will do nothing more than exacerbate and accelerate the damage to the ecosystem and contribute to its eventual and inevitable decline.

The so-called ‘climate change impacts’ are to date theoretical and based upon spurious modelling, not hard evidence. There is a basic ignorance and misunderstanding of the centuries-old drought-fire-flood cycle of Australia which has been in place for thousands of years and its specific application to Victoria (See Professor Stephen Pyne’s excellent work *Burning Bush – A Fire History Of Australia*). Forest fires are a complex matter of natural events, human expansion and development, and poor asset and bush management, not ‘climate change’. I am of the view that the alleged ‘impacts of climate change’ are at this point illusory and imaginary. Indeed, this is ‘Chicken Little’, the ‘Emperors New Clothes’ and ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’ all rolled into one!

There are far more important matters to be addressed in the proper eco-management of Victoria’s biodiversity than ‘First Peoples’ or ‘Climate Change’. They are serious matters that deserve serious attention and resources, yet pale into insignificance compared to the funding allocated to Aboriginal organisations and ‘climate change’. Why are the REAL threats being ignored in favour of focusing upon funding imaginary rights and theoretical threats?

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

The only comment I have about this is that any legislation must be fair and balanced. It must balance the need to preserve the environment yet at the same time accommodate reasonable and fair usage by all traditional user groups. On the whole, legislation is becoming far too prescriptive, limiting activities that essentially do no harm to forests or waterways and prevent activities that better manage and protect forests. It often appears that legislation has an ulterior ideologically based Green or racial motive and is an agenda to simply keep people out of the bush.

What has happened now with the new Aboriginal legislation is that ‘Aborigines’ will now be entitled to increased and unfettered access to public land, property, assets, land titles, the bush and waterways that will be denied to the rest of the community. This is also a complex matter that should be addressed in some detail; however, suffice it to say in this paper, the whole concept is grossly disproportionate and unfair. What irrational, illogical and convoluted thinking can ever possibly have anyone think that this arrangement is ‘equitable’ and will somehow result in ‘reconciliation’?

(c) The adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems;

The Government’s programs and funding are entirely inadequate and ineffective at protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems – indeed, the Government’s policies, programs and funding priorities are making the situation substantially worse! As noted above, there are millions of wasted dollars given to groups who do nothing to properly manage the ecosystems, or to address the neglect, or to repair the damage to the bush.

The matters raised in part (a) above are indicative of where the real funding should be allocated and spent, yet that is not happening, and has not happened for decades. Is it any wonder that our ecosystems are damaged and heading for decline?

How is it that generous funding is given to groups such as the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), which is nothing more than a lobbying and advocacy group concerned more about their ongoing existence than actually caring for the bush, and to push the Government's socialist Green agenda, yet there is no funding available at all to be given to conservative groups such as the Bush Users Group United (BUGU) or the Australian Environment Foundation (AEF) who are totally opposed to this Green agenda and can see the damage it is doing to our ecosystems? Where is the equity in this? Obviously Government is not serious about funding adequacy and especially effectiveness. Funding is withdrawn from bush maintenance and gates erected to keep people out so that the public will not see how overgrown and infested our ecosystems have become!

Given their comparatively minute numbers, how can the Government give so much money to Aboriginal groups and yet nothing to other groups that represent thousands of bush users? Obviously, money is allocated to groups that support the government's agenda and ideology, and not to conservative 'status quo;' groups. Further, tax deductibility and charitable status is given by the Commonwealth to advocacy groups that neither deserve it, nor qualify for it, and abuse it as well.

So much of the required activity to properly manage the land is just 'too hard' (for bureaucrats) to actually do and actually involves people getting out into the bush, working hard, and getting their hands dirty, not just sitting on the 16th floor of a city office block theorising about what should be done and making more rules and regulations, yet all the while actually doing nothing practically positive at all, and indeed, actively preventing others (like four-wheel-drive and historical interest groups) from doing volunteer work to keep bush tracks open and maintained! This has now been Government policy for decades, removing all of the hard workers from the bush and replacing them with over-paid over-qualified office workers in the city. No wonder the bush and the roads and tracks associated with it have turned to ruin.

I am further concerned that the Government has 'bought off' via grant funding community-based organisations such as Four-Wheel-Drive-Victoria who are supposed to represent the interests of all four-wheel drivers across the state, but who now seem to be a self-interested group seeking to benefit themselves and a select few of their mates.

This is 'divide and conquer' at work! After observing over forty years of this neglect, mismanagement and selective funding, I am utterly appalled!

(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;

The way this reference is written would imply that the entire paragraph is "in the context of climate change impacts", which is of course, more star gazing. There is no foregone conclusion that such predicted "climate change impacts" will ever occur,

and indeed, current evidence clearly suggests they are not occurring, yet government seems determined to spend (waste) more money in this area.

This is totally reminiscent of the Y2K scam at the turn of the century in 2000. Billions of dollars were spent to prevent the expected ‘Y2K bug’ meltdown but nothing happened. And nothing happened not because of the billions spent, but because nothing was ever going to happen; nevertheless, thousands of people enriched themselves on the threat of it. Seems nothing much has changed!

So if we remove the last seven words from the reference sentence, and ignore the “context of climate change impacts”, what do we have? We have exactly the same issues as described in part (a) above – this is not rocket science! Alleged fears and scare-mongering over ‘climate change’ should not be an over-arching determinant factor in this topic, nor should it be used as an excuse to further ignore the matters detailed in part (a) above. In this context, the ‘legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions’ and priorities should be obvious and abundantly clear!

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

This is an absurd reference. What agenda can possibly be behind it? Given that half of Victoria’s Aborigines live in Melbourne, the alleged “First Peoples’ connection to ‘country’”³ is an over-exaggerated claim, and what about everyone else’s ‘connection to country’? Why do we not matter, and why are we not only pushed aside, but pushed out in relation to our own connection to country?

Many of today’s ‘First Peoples’ have no more ‘connection to country’ than anyone else born and raised in (especially rural) Victoria. Sure, they have a history going back generations, and so do I and so do many other Victorians. My forebears owned land in many parts of Victoria, but I don’t get to go and claim that now, nor is it handed over to me for free.

The matter of fuel reduction burning probably falls under this category of ‘restoring Victoria’s environment’, and there are many questions to be asked here as well. For example:

- Why is the CFA no longer involved in fuel reduction burns for training purposes?
- Why has the amount of fuel reduction burning carried out been slashed to a fraction of what it was?
- Why are landholders no longer allowed to conduct their own ‘creeping burns’ as they were effectively able to do quite safely and effectively many years ago?

I note that Aboriginal cultural burning, or ‘Fire Stick Farming’, is currently the latest fad, yet in Victoria is really given nothing but lip service. It is of course completely impractical in many peri-urban interface areas, but nevertheless, the cool burning of

³ ‘Country’ now being a trendy word for ‘land’ that apparently only applies to Aboriginal people. Whitefellas are ‘on the land’ or ‘in the bush’ whereas Aboriginal people are ‘on Country’, which is somehow more spiritual and special.

bushland is possible in many areas, but is labour intensive and must be carried out at least once or twice a year to be effective. Again, Aboriginal people do not have a monopoly on this concept as many landowners were doing it for decades before it was outlawed in the late 1980's and early 1990's and a litany of new laws preventing private (or CFA) fuel reduction by fire. Today fuel reduction burns continue to be carried out 'the old way' by DELWP, and that is by localised burns in small areas that nevertheless, by definition, become destructive patchy hot burns or ineffective cold burns. These burns are now hugely expensive risk-averse operations to carry out, involving many staff and resources, including helicopters. Just think of how much fuel reduction cool burning could be carried out by landowners if it were again made legal, or by Government agencies if they had the funding instead of the multi-millions of dollars handed over to Aboriginal organisations or wasted on 'climate change'.

Regarding employment, are we talking about "increasing and diversifying employment opportunities" for all Victorians, or just for this new class of citizens to be now known as our "First Peoples"? If it is the latter, where is the equity in that? Why is this funding now seemingly reserved only for 'Aborigines'? Most of these people are no different to the rest of us – so why the unbelievable special and favoured treatment? Is the funding of so many Aboriginal organisations simply now a new form of legitimate welfare, providing funding for jobs, as is now rampant in Central Australia? Of course providing employment is intrinsically beneficial for many Aboriginal (and other) people in terms of self-esteem and acknowledgement, but it does not have to be done this way, to the detriment of the rest of the community.

Contemporary Aboriginal people generally now do not have any special knowledge of the bush any more than many other country people have – indeed, many have far less knowledge. There are no mystical, mythical, spiritual secrets out there that only Aboriginal people have access to, especially in Victoria. Would the Government care to explain how the creation of all these Aboriginal bureaucracies is going to assist in biodiversity conservation and ecosystem recovery any better than any other person or agency? What is the purpose in funding all of these duplicated services under 'Aboriginal control' (many of which employ 'whitefellas' as their staff anyway). I would really like some serious answers to all these questions.

(f) any other related matters.

I would like to raise the following related and pertinent matters as follows:

1. The creation of division in the community:

The current legislation, policies and funding arrangements made by governments over the last few decades in relation to Aboriginals affairs will over time, far from promoting reconciliation and equity in the community, do just the opposite. As 'Aboriginal' power and control becomes more entrenched, so the resentment and division will grow. All policy decisions of governments have outcomes, good or bad, and these policies will simply be divisive and cause conflict. This is not what we want for Victoria.

2. Breakdown of societal cohesiveness:

In accordance with the above, to be successful every society must ultimately be cohesive, that is, they must all be pulling in the same direction. This means similar

beliefs, values and cultural norms. Every society can and will tolerate small cultural differences by minorities to their main homogeneity, but this only extends so far. Once one group of people, especially a minority, no matter who they are or how intrinsically valued their culture, starts to threaten the majority homogeneity and the rights of others, then trouble soon follows. Current Victorian Government policies and practices are now setting up our Victorian society for this type of societal separation and breakdown.

3. Departure from facts and evidence:

The present day Aboriginal and Climate Change industries are not based upon factual observation or evidence, and are in many ways simply fabrications and a distortion of both history and truth, which have been clearly manipulated to suit the new agenda. Much is based upon vested interest and access to funds and benefits. Common sense, rational and reasonable thought, and reasoned debate have departed into ideology, flights of fancy, wasted money and personal abuse. This is no way to manage society for the future, let alone an ecosystem. Indeed, it is no way to manage anything.

4. The slow and steady erosion of rights:

As an intrinsic part of points 1 to 3 above it is clear that an erosion of personal and collective rights and liberties is a part of the process. The rights and ability of ordinary ‘white’ Victorian citizens to enjoy our collective lands is being (or indeed has already been) handed over to a tiny select group in the community. Where is the protection of our rights, especially our traditional and cultural rights to be able to freely access land and do the things we have always been allowed to do in the past? Why is this changing?

5. Firewood Collection:

The Governments increasingly restrictive policies regarding the collection of firewood by members of the public is an averse and perverse ‘risk management’ policy that now exceeds what is reasonable. The collection of firewood pales into insignificance with the enormous destruction caused by wildfires, along with the risk-averse attitude of it being ‘too dangerous’ for the public to be alone in the bush because they might hurt themselves (and sue the Government). This attitude is offensive to all Victorians. The resource of huge stands of burnt forest trees are now left to fall and rot on the ground when they could assist many families to keep warm in winter. Meanwhile, those same families now have to pay for fossil fuel generated heating. The furphy of alleged hollow-log habitat for animals is greatly exaggerated, merely being used to justify further restrictions.

6. DELWP funding grants:

In the 2018-2019 Financial Year, DELWP gave \$13.1 million dollars to Aboriginal Organisations in three categories:

- Management of Public Land and Forests – \$5,834,835.00
- Effective Water Management and Supply – \$2,938,529.00
- Local Government Grants⁴ – \$4,330,498.00⁵

⁴ Despite that fact that these are not Local Government organisations

⁵ See Appendix A for more details.

The citizens and taxpayers of Victoria are entitled to answers to the following questions:

1. Why are these land management activities not able to be carried out by existing organisations?
2. Why do we need new specifically ‘Aboriginal’ organisations to do this work?
3. What is it that these Aboriginal organisations actually do, and what will the additional benefit be?
4. What is it that these Aboriginal organisations do that is any different to what the existing organisations do?
5. What is the actual intent of the creation of all these new organisations and their funding?
6. What are the reporting protocols and accountability for all of this public funding and how is that openly reported to all Victorians?
7. Why is there now such a duplication of services when Government’s have been for decades opposed to such wasteful duplication and always attempted to eliminate it?
8. Why has all of this been done in secrecy and hiding from the citizens of Victoria without any opportunity for their input?

When added to the already created ‘Aboriginal Parliament’ (and the fact that the Aboriginal Flag now also flies above the Victorian Parliament building) it would only appear a matter of time before the creation of separate ‘Aboriginal State’, funded by the rest of the community. This ‘rent-seeking’ racket has already created great enmity in the community and will only increase. It is a great way to actually create racism, and a new contempt for people claiming to be ‘Aboriginal’. This is especially the case when virtually all of Victoria’s ‘Aborigines’ have a substantial European heritage (like many of the rest of us) as well.

7. Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. 2006:

What is the point of having a Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities if it: a) favours one particular racial group, (surely that’s a breach of human rights in itself) and b) can simply be overridden by the establishment of any new law (ie: “other than in accordance with law.”)

- **Freedom of Movement (Section 12):**

Every person within Victoria ‘lawfully has the right to move freely within Victoria and to enter and leave it and has the freedom to choose where to live’. One would have thought that this also applies to access to public land, but this is increasingly becoming not the case. To assist this to come into effect, more and more land that was once public is now no longer, having been re-created as freehold title and handed over to Aboriginal organisations. This is a clear beach of our human rights.

- **Freedom of expression (Section 15):**

‘Every person has the right to hold an opinion without interference’, yet this is increasingly becoming not the case. One’s opinions are regularly interfered with by vilification and abuse. Where is the real protection to hold a differing view from that of the prevailing masses?

- **Cultural rights (Section 19):**

“(1) All persons with a particular cultural, religious, racial or linguistic background must not be denied the right, in community with other persons of that background, to enjoy his or her culture, to declare and practise his or her religion and to use his or her language.

(2) Aboriginal persons hold distinct cultural rights and must not be denied the right, with other members of their community—

- (a) to enjoy their identity and culture; and
- (b) to maintain and use their language; and
- (c) to maintain their kinship ties; and
- (d) to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.”

These ‘cultural rights’ apply to all citizens of Victoria, in relation to the practise of their culture. Yet this is now being denied to many, especially to those of Anglo-Saxon heritage whose activities on public (and in some cases private) land are now being prohibited. Where is the protection against this? In terms of rights, there is little difference between the diverse cultural traditions of Italians, Greeks, Macedonians, Lebanese, Chinese, indeed even the Cornish, the Welsh and the Scottish. Yet these are all to be given a back seat to the pre-eminent importance of Aboriginal culture, along with all of the money and benefits accruing. So this is the equity of human rights – to favour one small minority over a much larger majority?

Further, part (2) of Section 19 ascribes particular and additional ‘distinct rights’ to ‘Aboriginal’ people over and above the rights of all others. Surely this in itself is a breach of human rights for all others not deemed ‘Aboriginal’? Indeed, part (2) would appear a Trojan Horse to justify much of the new legislation, policy, practice, funding benefits and largesse that is currently being showered upon those fortunate enough to be able to identify as being ‘Aboriginal’.

What I would do – My Recommendations:

By way of my own suggestions, based upon many years of experience and research, I would make the following recommendations:

1. Treat all Victorians equally and with fairness. Do not create a special category of ‘Aborigines’ who have special and exclusive rights over, or access to, public or other land and assets not equally available to all other Victorians.
2. Do not pass on at no cost any Freehold Title of any public land, buildings or waterways to any Aboriginal organisations or individuals. They can purchase it like anyone else when it comes up for sale, and not by using public taxpayer funds. Aboriginal organisations should be self-funded businesses just like any other, not new quasi-government departments full of taxpayer funded bureaucrats.
3. Do not allow an Aboriginal ‘rent-seeking’ culture to emerge whereby Victorians must lease-back public land from Aboriginal organisations or pay for any other considerations, fees or charges. We have only one Government.
4. Cease ‘reserved’ employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and make it a part of a more general (but non-compulsory) selection criteria.
5. Restrict funding to ‘Aboriginal’ organisations in favour of funding actual positive and practical remedial works that will benefit ecosystems such as the removal of weeds and feral animals, track maintenance and the undertaking of effective fuel reduction burns.
6. Do not base short or long-term land management or ecosystem decisions on the basis of as yet unproven theories on ‘climate change’.
7. Restrict funding to ‘climate change’ organisations in favour of funding actual positive and practical remedial works that will benefit ecosystems such as the

removal of weeds and feral animals and the undertaking of effective fuel reduction burns.

8. Immediately disband VEAC and reform the assessment council as a competent, representative, fair, unbiased and non-ideologically driven organisation that can deliver fair, scientifically-based, rational and non-agenda based decisions for all Victorians.
9. Immediately cease the creation of any more National Parks, and indeed, return some National Parks back to public land State Forest status.
10. Do not exclude genuine and valid user groups from any areas of public land based upon ideologically and Green driven agendas or any other vested interest groups.
11. Cease the current program of further vehicular track closures and re-open many tracks that have already been closed.
12. Cease the program of herding campers into designated campsites and allow campers more freedom to camp where they like on public land, and at no cost.
13. Cease the current practice of disallowing access to various areas for various activities because of 'cultural sensitivity' or 'sacred sites' (ie: stopping the Sea Lake Rally and rock climbing in the Grampians).
14. Allow for the reasonable free collection of firewood by members of the public, especially in fire-affected areas.
15. Allow landholders to conduct their own cool fuel reduction burns on their own properties as they once did in the past.
16. Allow local CFA crews to re-commence involvement in cool fuel reduction burns on public land.
17. Encourage Aboriginal people to carry out their 'fire stick farming' (in reality cool fuel reduction burns) on land they manage, and to offer their services to others who may desire it.
18. Stop the funding to so many Aboriginal organisations on the basis that they have some mythical, mystical 'extra knowledge' that no-one else possesses, or that they somehow still 'own' the land upon which we all tread.
19. Absolutely DO NOT allow the creation of a so-called 'Great Forest National Park', which would spell the death-knell for that entire region.
20. Do not cease the harvesting of timber from native forests, but review it to ensure that its methods can be less damaging to the environment yet at the same time remain sustainable.
21. Open up more areas across the State for timber harvesting so that the present industry is not so concentrated, yet set new upper limits on overall harvesting – it cannot be just open-ended.
22. Explore other methods of timber harvesting that do not involve clear felling of entire coupes and substantially modify the way this is carried out so that the impact on forests, especially that of widespread clear felling, can be substantially reduced.
23. Significantly increase funding and concessions for hardwood plantations on private land.
24. Significantly increase funding for active weed and feral animal control.
25. Significantly increase funding for track maintenance and improvements.
26. Cease funding to supposedly 'environment' organisations that are in fact little more than advocacy and lobby groups, like the VNPA.

27. Open up more areas of public land for feral pest hunting, especially in relation to dogs, cats, foxes and all species of deer.
28. Stop lying about and misrepresenting the historical past regarding Aborigines and the establishment and settlement of both Australia and Victoria.
29. Stop wasting huge amounts of money on ‘climate change solutions’ and start focussing on the real issues as outlined above.
30. Explore other diverse ways of value-adding to all forest product resources.

All of that said, unfortunately this Inquiry would seem to be little more than an opportunity to shore up policy directions already embarked upon by this Government to justify and promote ‘Aboriginality’ and ‘Climate Change’ policies. There is virtually no hope that any positive change will come of it.

My concern is that extreme Green environmentalist groups and others will use this Inquiry as an opportunity to peddle their propaganda of further denying bush access and recreational-based activities, eliminating state forest based industry and perpetuating the ‘lock it up and leave it’ agenda, which does not serve our flora and fauna or landscape well. We instead need sensible debate and recommendations.

In summary, the ecosystems of Victoria are damaged, in places quite badly – mostly by wildfire. It would appear that nothing is being done to repair this damage or prevent it in the future, other than giving vast sums of money to Aboriginal organisations and creating a ‘climate change catastrophe’ scare campaign. Neither of these courses of action will do anything whatsoever to benefit the current state of our ecosystems. Indeed, it is much like shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic. If we really want to do something positive for our forests then the present policies are completely the wrong focus for expenditure. If this Inquiry retains its focus purely on ‘First Peoples’ and ‘Climate Change’ it will have contributed absolutely nothing towards the very real problems of ecosystem damage and decline. The focus should be on the very real problems, not on the invented ones.

What then are the real problems? Forty-five years of work, observation, experience, research, knowledge and talking with bush users tells me that they are as follows:

- The proliferation of weeds across the landscape and in the bush, especially Blackberry, Scotch Thistles, Dandelion, Patterson’s Curse, Ragwort and Capeweed.
- The proliferation of feral pest animals across the landscape and in the bush, especially cats, dogs, rabbits, foxes, Indian Myna birds, and all species of deer.⁶
- Ongoing underfunded poor road and track construction and maintenance.
- An ever increasing number of locked, overgrown and inaccessible areas and tracks now closed to the public.
- A steadfast refusal to admit to the real problems and to adequately address and fund them.
- The self-centred ideologically based Trojan Horse socialist Green ‘environment’ organisations overrun with hypocrisy and self-interest with no real practical concern for or involvement with the forests at all.

⁶ Note that native animal species are not endangered from climate change, but from wildfire, cats, dogs and foxes and some careless forestry activities.

- A complete lack of equity in government funding and grants so that conservative ‘status quo’ organisations receive nothing, thereby always remaining at a disadvantage and are essentially shut out of the debate altogether.
- The horrendous bias of VEAC and the unjustified and illegitimate creation of more parks to the enormous detriment of local industry, businesses and recreation.
- The abandonment of all sensible cool fuel reduction burning on both private and public land and the lip-service paid to Aboriginal cultural burning.
- The redirection and misdirection of government funds away from practical environmental and bush management outcomes towards city-based organisations, bureaucrats and salaries. So much of this seems to just provide jobs for city people and funding to perpetuate unproductive organisations – it does nothing practical for the bush.
- The refusal to allow ordinary citizens to freely collect firewood from areas of State Forest.
- The destruction of the public’s ‘bush experience’ by ever increasing regulation and confinement.

The problems with ecosystem damage or decline in Victoria are NOT and NEVER HAVE BEEN the lack of ‘First Peoples’ involvement in the management of ecosystems (yet like everyone else, they have always had the option to do this if they so chose) or anthropomorphic ‘Climate Change’ (which is largely irrelevant). These are ideologically-based rationalisations and inventions that will contribute nothing towards the proper management of the Victorian landscape and contribute little towards the repair of already heavily damaged ecosystems of Victoria. It is the failure to act in terms of the matters addressed and outlined above that will eventually lead to the inexorable decline and destruction of Victorian ecosystems, and we are already well on the way!

Will the new land owning ‘Aboriginal’ people be a part of the solution to repairing ecosystem damage and preventing eventual decline, or will they simply become a new part of the problem, a new ‘rent-seeking’ bureaucracy syphoning away much needed vast sums of money for their own purposes leaving the forests and landscape vulnerable to suffering more neglect and mismanagement, rather than actively contributing both finances and labour to real solutions,? I suspect I already know the answer to that question, although I remain open to being wrong and surprised. I may be accused of being ‘anti-Aboriginal’ but this is utterly untrue, I am not – I didn’t write these one-sided Terms of Reference, I am merely responding to them.

I firmly believe in one Australia and that all Australians are equal and should be treated equally, notwithstanding that the poor and needy of any persuasion should receive some special extra assistance. For the last four decades we have seen this new ‘Aboriginal’ movement (based upon revisionist history about our origins) advocating for the separation of Aboriginal people (via self-determination and empowerment) now growing into a taxpayer funded de-facto discriminatory segregationist and apartheid behemoth, and as the atrocious ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign grows in strength, to see Aboriginal people placed in a positions of superiority and preference over ‘the rest of us’. This is largely promoted by the ABC, SBS and NITV. I do not believe this is good for the homogeneity of any society (look what happened to South

Africa) so if this continues in Victoria, there will be very dark times ahead for societal division.

Sadly, as the ever-increasing environmental rules and regulations grow and gather pace, and as the restrictive laws and conditions constantly change, the young people of the future will never know what they are missing out on and will never know how free things once were. If you are a bird born in a cage, or a fish born in a tank, you will not know that once upon a time birds flew freely in the air and fish swam freely as they liked in the waters. Our community is increasingly being placed in cages and tanks! Victoria's outdoors will soon become a strictly limited and highly regulated place of national parks with limited and specified camping spaces and few drivable tracks. They will be overrun with weeds and feral pests, and regularly scorched or obliterated by fire. They will be managed by 'Aboriginal' people, who look and live just like us, yet they will have the jobs and money. This highly regulated and controlled new world will be one of stifling alienated misery. Is that what we want? Well, that is precisely where we are heading!

That is of course if our neglected and locked-up ecosystems haven't by then been utterly destroyed by repeated wildfires. We know that two or three repeated hot fires in the same area over a ten year period or less will completely kill off an area of bush so that it cannot regenerate on its own. I have no doubt we shall see more occurrences of that in years to come, just as we have seen up on the Howitt Plains. Not climate change – just mismanagement!

The emphasis on 'First Peoples' and 'Climate Change' are a counterproductive diversion away from addressing the real and practical issues. They are also a huge waste of money, simply providing jobs for people who in reality make little or no contribution to addressing the real problems of the bush. These are all self-evident truths that many of the silent majority population of Australia know to be true – so why the pretence?

It would appear that Parks and Reserves which have been transferred to Aboriginal Title are no longer 'public land'. It becomes Aboriginal owned land which is then leased back to the people of Victoria through the government at considerable cost to the taxpayer, and still to be 'jointly managed' with ParksVic and DELWP. What does this mean in reality, who will pay for it, and where is the benefit to the citizens of Victoria of this new expensive arrangement?

There seems to now be a complete disconnect between what we in the public sphere know to be factual and true, and what public 'servant' bureaucrats in their alien bubble seem to believe, think and do. This is becoming increasingly problematic as more and more bureaucrats create more regulations based upon their ideology and beliefs rather than the truth of what happens in the real world.

To conclude, I have now witnessed over the last forty years the land management of Victoria degenerate from a local common sense, rational, empirical fact-based, boots-on-the-ground approach into ideologically and academically city-based, counter-productive, self-interest-group, bureaucrat dominated, cost-saving laziness where the bush has suffered immeasurably as a result. I know full well that the views expressed in this submission are shared by many thousands of Victorians and Australians, and

would be shared by many thousands more if they only knew what was going on behind their backs and without their knowledge or agreement.

As a Victorian I am very angry to see what decades of ideology, incompetence, restrictions, self-interest and penny-pinching has done to our forests. Yet I realise that all of this is now an unstoppable runaway train – which is a great pity because all Victorians will one day regret the times that all of this was allowed to happen and one way or another, we will all have to pay for it!

Yours sincerely,

Dr David Barton.

Appendix A

Funding to Aboriginal Organisations:

DELWP 2018-2019 Annual Report

Management of Public Land and Forests - grant recipients

(Pp 284-287)

Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation	\$1,795,134.00
Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation	\$903,194.00
Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board	\$690,000.00
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation	\$490,448.00
Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations	\$389,126.00
Dhelkunya Dja (A sub-set of the Dja Dja Wurrung)	\$380,000.00
Barengi Gadjin Land Council	\$264,660.00
Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation	\$245,000.00
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation	\$170,000.00
Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation	\$120,000.00
Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation	\$120,000.00
Wurundjeri Land & Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Aboriginal Corp	\$120,000.00
Djandak (Another sub-set of the Dja Dja Wurrung)	\$77,273.00
Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation	\$50,000.00
Wurundjeri Tribe Land Compensation and Cultural Heritage Council Inc	\$20,000.00
	\$5,834,835.00

Effective Water Management and Supply - grant recipients

(Pp-276-279)

Djandak (Another sub-set of the Dja Dja Wurrung)	\$804,591
Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation	\$422,582
Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation	\$330,090
Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation	\$289,615
Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation	\$270,776
Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation	\$247,666
Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation	\$185,803
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation	\$184,393
Wurundjeri Land & Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Aboriginal Corp	\$94,286
Wurundjeri Tribe Land Compensation and Cultural Heritage Council Inc	\$75,000
Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation	\$33,727
	\$2,938,529

Local Government Grant Recipients

(Pp 299 – 302)

Budja Budja Aboriginal Co-operative Inc	\$800,000.00
Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation	\$600,000.00
Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation	\$598,367.00
Aboriginal Community Elders Services Inc	\$494,236.00
Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-operative Ltd	\$287,744.00

Aboriginal Housing Victoria	\$287,652.00
Wurundjeri Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Aboriginal Corp	\$150,000.00
Worawa Aboriginal College Ltd	\$121,750.00
Wandoon Estate Aboriginal Corporation	\$119,911.00
Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service Inc	\$115,563.00
Aborigines Advancement League Inc	\$103,299.00
Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association Inc	\$90,020.00
Healesville Belonging Place	\$50,000.00
Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Co-operative	\$41,044.00
Baluk Arts	\$40,000.00
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation	\$40,000.00
Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Service Inc	\$40,000.00
Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd	\$40,000.00
Moogji Aboriginal Council	\$40,000.00
Victorian Aboriginal Community Services	\$40,000.00
Victorian Aboriginal Health Service	\$40,000.00
Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd	\$38,463.00
Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	\$38,304.00
Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations	\$36,000.00
Kirrip Aboriginal Corporation	\$33,096.00
Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd	\$32,000.00
Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation (p288)	\$13,049.00
	\$4,330,498.00

Totals:

Management of Public Land and Forests	\$5,834,835.00
Effective Water Management and Supply	\$2,938,529.00
Local Government Grant Recipients	\$4,330,498.00
2018-2019 Total:	\$13,103,862.00