

## **Submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria**

My name is Eve Stocker. I live in Melbourne at [REDACTED]. I can be contacted on [REDACTED]. I am making this submission as an individual and concerned resident of Victoria and not on behalf of any organisation or group. My submission is not confidential.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning on the decline of Victoria's ecosystems and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species.

Over the years I have been deeply concerned about Victorian Governments' on-going logging of old growth native forests. The forests now cover only a tiny proportion of the pre-colonisation forested areas of Victoria. What small amount is left represents areas of very high conservation values, containing globally unique ecosystems supporting a significant range of diverse living organisms: plants, fungi, insects, spiders, animals, birds and fish, including threatened and endangered species. Over the years various governments have said they want to preserve endangered species of animals (frogs, birds, gliders, possums, etc.) native to these forests, yet logging continued under their watch, and the animals became more seriously threatened and endangered as their habitat disappeared and became increasingly degraded. This indicates a serious on-going weakness in existing laws, knowledge and motivation to protect habitats and ecosystems.

At the end of 2019 and the beginning of this year Victoria (and the entire eastern coast of Australia) experienced some of the most severe and extensive fires ever seen. The habitat loss and loss of food sources for the animals living in the forests, resulting from the devastating fires, increased the animals' precarious status and it has been estimated that over three billion animals were killed in the fires (across the whole extent of the fires). Research and expert knowledge after the fires specified that the best way for the forests and their ecosystems to recover was to leave them undisturbed. However, VicForests went ahead and logged these burnt forests anyway. The additional disturbance caused more damage to the environment, water catchments, and remaining habitat, reducing the potential for recovery.

If the Victorian Government sincerely wishes to protect threatened and endangered species and what is left of the forest environments then logging of old growth native forests needs to stop immediately and permanently. The logging of these high conservation value forests is unsustainable; only a tiny proportion of the timber is used for wood working (furniture, joinery) and most is turned into wood chips for making paper and packaging. I do not want my taxes supporting such an enterprise. If society really needs more paper and packaging it should be coming from increased recycling and plantation timber. Old growth native forests must be left alone and protected from destruction.

A moratorium on all logging and Regional Forest Agreements needs to be implemented immediately in light of the damage caused by the devastating fires and historic and on-going logging operations. Urgent biosystem inventories need to be carried out to assess and document the state of the environment: what species are left, what is recovering, what has vanished, what changes have occurred to water systems, soil systems, forest structure, carbon storage mechanisms, etc. After complete inventories and evaluations of the forest regions, including those burned in the bushfires and those not burned, then all existing Regional Forest Agreements should be reviewed and re-evaluated.

Along with the moratorium on logging, the government needs to seriously and urgently plan, in conjunction and close consultation with the forest industries and regional groups, including the workers in regional industries, what industries and livelihoods will be taking over from the forest industries in all regions of the state. Land care programs and reforestation should be included in the range of opportunities replacing forest industry work.

Forest areas in Victoria need more protection and the protection needs to be expanded to more forest land. Additional state and national parks and reserves need to be created in order to protect the environments and logging needs to be permanently excluded. Burning cycles need to be carried out using methods appropriate to low-impact, “cool” burns, at the appropriate times of the year, about which Aboriginal people in these areas know significant amounts. Indigenous knowledge and participation should be paramount and leading the maintenance and recovery work in forest environments, as well as other environments. The areas need to be cared for and protected for their own intrinsic value, not treated as something from which people can extract as much as possible for some few individuals’ wealth. As David Lindenmayer, et.al. says regarding Australia’s temperate woodlands, but the same is true for its old growth native forests:

“The unique nature of our biota places a particular responsibility on the Australian human population to take care of these natural resources, both for future generations and on behalf of other nations.” (Lindenmayer, Crane, Michael, *Woodlands*, CSIRO, 2005, p. 137.)

Victoria’s nature protection and conservation laws need to be significantly strengthened, and independent regulator bodies that are adequately resourced and that take their responsibilities seriously need to enforce laws now in existence. Environmental destruction and degradation needs to be prevented by the regulator, and strong, meaningful deterrents and penalties for breaches of the laws need to be enforced in order to stop continuing decline and degradation of Victoria’s ecosystems and habitats.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute these points to the Inquiry.