

Submission re **INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VIC**

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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

This title of this inquiry indicates that our Victorian Parliament recognizes that ecosystems in Victoria are in decline. It is not an inquiry into *whether* our ecosystems are in decline, nor merely how to halt it, but *how to restore* it.

If our ecosystems are in decline, the regulatory systems designed to protect them are not working effectively. Why? They appear to be outweighed by economic interests. Finding ways to reduce the conflict between economic and environmental issues could be crucial to making the regulatory systems more effective

This submission is written from the perspective of an interested, concerned, *inexpert*, ordinary member of the public.

It focuses on:

1. Key issues which underpin the failure of regulatory control to arrest the decline of our ecosystems and some thoughts on how to address them.
2. Suggestions for our regulatory system
3. Conclusion that arresting the ecosystem decline can only work if ways are found to reduce the conflict between economic and environmental interests.

1. Key Issues which underpin 'Ecosystem Decline'

- the conflict of interests between the Growth Economic Model and protection of the environment on which that model relies
- the power of lobby groups
- lack of political will
- the need to focus on the inter-relatedness of these issues

Suggestion The political will appears to be to be seen to be protecting the environment, while actually putting short-term economic gains uppermost, fuelled by the need to create jobs, gain votes, build economic activity and appease the lobby groups. These are inter-related issues.

There may be some beneficial shifts following on from the pandemic as immigration is down and expected to remain low for an unpredictable period of time. Consequently we may be forced to adapt our Economic Model to one based on smaller levels of growth. That would require a shift to the use of renewables

1.1 The Growth Economic Model versus Environmental Protection

The fundamental issue which appears to be undermining the decline in ecosystems is the tension between the short term interests of economic growth (jobs and wealth creation) versus the longer term need for environmental sustainability, ironically, on which these jobs and wealth rely.

Our model for economic growth is based on population growth as a pre-requisite for economic prosperity. However this model also fuels demand for land for housing, farming, infrastructure and power, along with the natural resources to supply these needs, with the resulting environmental degradation fuelling climate change.

Consequently the need to balance the interests of the economy and the environment is recognized, but the need for this inquiry shows this balance to be an *imbalance*, with the environment on the losing side.

A longer term perspective shows that the public are paying the economic costs of extreme weather events of drought, floods, fire and wind, while polluting business activities which contribute to the impact of climate change, are not. Is this a form of cost shifting? There needs to be a carbon tax, by any name.

1.2 The power of lobby groups

Community Environmental lobby groups are no match for the financial resources poured into supporting mining, coal, gas, forestry and water interests. Even so, the public support for solar is leading investors to renewables. For this Parliamentary Inquiry to be successful, we need to be able to find a way to counter this influence.

Jobs and a working economy are of paramount importance to all, as was demonstrated by the support for the Carmichael mines in Queensland during the last federal elections and the fears of forestry workers of East Gippsland of losing the work they are skilled in.

1.3 Lack of political will

The political will appears to be to be seen to be protecting the environment, while actually putting short-term economic gains uppermost, fuelled by the need to create jobs, build economic activity, appease the lobby groups and above all, gain votes.

1.4 The need to focus on the inter-relatedness of these issues

It can be seen that all of the above are inter-related issues.

1.5 **Suggestions**

With the current pandemic, immigration is expected to be down, so we would be wise to start now on working out how to adapt our Growth Economic Model to one based on smaller levels of population growth.

Build more jobs in contexts where protecting the environment meshes with economic interests (eg renewables, eco tourism) reduces the conflict between economic and environmental interests.

Phase out logging in native forests within the next four years and ban salvage logging immediately. In all such cases, developing alternative employment for people who work in mining and forestry requires planning, not only for upskilling, but for unskilled work.

2 **Suggestions addressing failures in our regulatory system**

2.1 Retrospective permits should not be permitted to be issued, where a benefit is gained by the unapproved action. For example, in October 2017 in Eltham a property owner cleared some trees in the gully of a creek on a property zoned Rural Conservation and began to build a shed. Neighbours complained and objections were lodged by neighbours and community groups.. The owner was granted a retrospective permit because, with the trees cleared, his actions met those requirements, but had he not first cleared the trees illegally, he would not have met those requirements. The result was an encouragement for others to follow suit. Another outcome was that

neighbours who had looked out across the treed gully which ran through their own properties too, now looked out on a shed in a gully bereft of trees.

2.2 Strengthen Victoria's Planning Provisions in relation to the Rural Conservation Zone and the Green Wedge Zone. The RCZ is the only statewide rural zone that has a specific focus on conservation of native vegetation communities. In Nillumbik Shire there has been growing pressure to put the rights of owners to do as they wish ahead of following the planning scheme. In North Warrandyte, in Nillumbik Shire in March 2017, a permit application to cut **746** trees, take the ridge off the top of a hill and widen the driveway in a Rural Conservation Zone in the Green Wedge - in order to build a large, environmentally friendly house with large outbuildings was approved by a majority of councillors, against the recommendations of their own planning department, This went to VCAT, the Vic Supreme Court, then back to VCAT, when the owner withdrew his application. The cost in terms of time and money to the owner, council and the community objectors was substantial. Similar situations continued. This pressure to bend the rules against protection of our biodiversity has been a constant thread throughout this Council's term. Please strengthen the rules in the RCZ so that councillors know they can not be bent.

2.3 There is also pressure by land owners to shift the Urban Growth Boundary. This must not happen! There is enough loss of biodiversity as development within the Green Wedge continues.

2.4 There is some confusion over who has responsibility for managing creeks and their buffer zones. There is a need for better lines of communication between state government, water authorities and communities.

2.5 Programs supporting regenerative agriculture in Victoria would help to , encourage protection of significant landscape features such as creeks and gullies, increasing biodiversity on farmland as well as increasing agricultural output and carbon storage in soil.

2.6 Mitigation of climate change needs to be enshrined in Local Planning Laws

2.7 Currently the permitted use of water from the Yarra is significant. It would make more sense if people with those rights were only permitted to use them in winter to fill storage tanks.

3 Conclusion

Arresting the ecosystem decline can work best if ways are found to reduce the conflict between economic and environmental interests, thus increasing the political will to "balance" the two.

Many thanks for this opportunity
Betty Russell