

Gemma Hocking



Good afternoon,

I am writing to you the importance of addressing the extinction crisis and preventing any further loss to our already diminished biodiversity within Victoria's ecosystems. I currently work in the environmental management industry and I have seen first-hand the devastation that climate change, commercial industries of fishing, timber and non-renewable projects, increasing urban sprawls of our cities and limited financial allocation to land managers has had on our ecosystems. I want to outline some facts about Victoria.

- Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia - 66% of our land has been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants - the habitat that supports our native wildlife
- Over 700 native plants, animals, insects and beautiful ecosystems are under threat, with this number growing every day
- 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are now at the brink of extinction
- More than 70 threatened species make their home in forests that are still being logged

Tragically, this summer's fires have dramatically worsened the outlook for the places and creatures that make Victoria such an amazing place. The scale, severity and destruction of these fires was unprecedented.

The fires:

- Burned 1.4 million hectares, just in Victoria
- Destroyed more than 50% of the habitat for 185 rare and threatened Victorian animals, plants and other creatures
- Pushed already critically endangered species like the greater glider, smoky mouse, mountain ash eucalyptus and many others perilously close to extinction

Less than 1 percent of Victoria's grasslands remain due to urban sprawl and using land for agricultural purposes. In 2009, the Victorian Government promised the Commonwealth Government it would establish two reserves by 2020 to protect and enhance the plains' remnant grasslands and offset grassland destruction by Melbourne's creeping urban sprawl. Creating the reserves by buying 14,405 hectares of private land, containing 10,091 hectares of endangered 'grasslands', was the centrepiece of commitments made by the state and federal governments through the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) program conducted under Australia's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation 1999* (EPBC Act). Modelling concluded that the greatest conservation benefit would occur by creating the reserves as early as possible. However, to date, Victoria has only bought less than ten per cent of the planned reserves area. And the quality of much of the grasslands

has been allowed to seriously degrade through the spread of noxious weeds and poor management due to limited resources and funding.

I am currently employed within an organisation that manages Victoria's natural spaces. The amount of funding we get to manage noxious weeds and pest plants and animals is laughable. Most years the budget is nothing. Therefore, we must look to limited external sources to fund these programs. It is EXTREMELY disappointing that the Victorian and Federal Government do not take the threat of these issues seriously. With the limited internal resources we have on the ground, we try to do everything we can, however it never feels like we're doing enough and this personally, causes severe mental distress. The damage from feral animals and exotic plants is evident and increasing drastically. Feral animals like cats, foxes, rabbits, deer and horses have driven out or completely annihilated native animal populations and fragile ecosystems. Our native species of plants and animals are diminishing due to habitat and food loss and overriding competition from their exotic counterparts. To manage these issues it takes commitment, resources and money. The Victorian Government must take the threat to our native ecosystems seriously by supplying adequate resources and budgets to those who manage them on the ground.

We need more people employed within the natural resource management sector, supplying people with jobs and financial security. We can have programs and form relationships with mental health groups, medical societies and disability groups to all work together in protecting our bush from any further demise.

We must work towards a renewable, greener future and say no to new coal, fracking and gas ports. Look towards greener projects. Projects like the AGL gas port in Westernport Bay is not the world we want to create for future generations. Approving this project contradicts any protection values for our natural ecosystems the government may have. We absolutely love the Westernport bay community and always dreamed of raising our family in Balnarring. However we are now reconsidering due to the recent AGL gas port proposal as it will take away everything that we loved about the bay, such as peace and quiet, wetlands, clean air, amazing marine and bird species and contradicts our values about teaching our babies that we as a country and community are working towards a greener future.

I have a young family and I want to see the government take control in protecting our natural environments for our young and future populations. I want sacred sites protected, not demolished. I want Aboriginal clans listened to and to be a vital part of the decision-making process. We have laws that protect Aboriginal sites and artefacts, yet if they are in the way of a new road or tunnel these protection laws get thrown out the window.

Right now, as we come to grips with the economic fallout from COVID-19, it's a perfect time for governments to spend public money and create jobs looking after people and the environment. Here are some ideas that the Government could invest in to prove their commitment to ending the extinction crisis:

**a) A huge program of weed and invasive species eradication**

Victoria is overrun by weeds and invasive animals, which kill and out-compete our native plants and wildlife. It's a big job to manage them, but it's critical for restoring habitat. We could create thousands of jobs clearing weeds out of rivers, creeks, farmland and national parks, and humanely managing introduced animals like cats, deer, rabbits and foxes.

**b) A tree-planting workforce to restore habitat**

67% of Victoria's trees, mangroves, shrubs, and other plants have been cleared since colonisation. Much of what's left is in poor health. We could create thousands of jobs in both the city and the country, replanting trees and vegetation in our parks, streets, rivers and creeks right across our state, but especially in bushfire-affected areas. We could also help landowners plant native vegetation on their land.

**c) A dedicated program for reviving species facing extinction**

The work of rescuing Victoria's more than 120 species at risk of extinction deserves and needs a dedicated program of funding. NSW has committed \$100 million to a 'Save Our Species' program, which systematically identifies risks to species and goes about addressing them. It also includes action like breeding programs so healthy populations of animals, birds and plants can be restored. Victoria has nothing like this program and spends almost no money on this type of dedicated species recovery work. We also spend very little money on research for our scientists to study new solutions to the extinction crisis. It's time that changed.

**d) An end to habitat destruction and strengthened nature laws**

We cannot hope to stop extinction unless we stop the destructive activities that are driving it. We need to:

- End native forest logging and transition to a plantation- based timber industry
- Phase out coal and gas burning, which is making the climate crisis worse and driving devastating extreme events like heat waves, fires and floods
- Stop destructive and unnecessary development like the Western Highway Duplication and the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal which continue to bit-by-bit erode the health of Victoria's environment for corporate profits.
- Change the laws that allow wildlife to be killed, and grasslands and other habitat to be cleared, with little to no ramifications.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission and I look forward to the Victorian government strengthening its values and policies on protecting our environment for future generations to enjoy.

Regards,

Gemma Hocking