

Surf Coast Energy Group



To: The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Environment and
Planning Committee
Parliament House
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Monday, September 21, 2020

Re: Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

Thank you on behalf of the Surf Coast Energy Group (SCEG) for the opportunity to provide a joint submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

Sadly, the very title of this inquiry misleads submitters into believing adequate responses can be found to cater for never ending population increase. The error is important to highlight because biodiversity in Victoria is in decline under current population size and demand and urban sprawl and habitat loss feature as two main drivers of accelerating biodiversity loss. A better title would have been 'Can Environmental Infrastructure Meet Nature's and Humanities Requirements in the face of Growing Populations?' Let us be clear from the get go; from all the evidence and available data here and abroad we don't think it's possible. If we are to have any chance of meeting biodiversity conservation targets (including those outlined in Biodiversity 2037, and our national and international obligations), while ensuring a high quality of life for all Victorians, we must begin to consider the carrying capacity of our lands and aquatic systems.

The key problem with the 'for Growing Populations' part of the equation is that it's hopelessly open-ended; a bit like saying 'Inquiry into MCG seating for a growing population.' The following excerpt from the most recent World Wide Fund for Nature report underscores why this approach is no longer valid:

The top threats to species identified in the report are directly linked to human activities, including habitat loss, degradation, and over-exploitation of wildlife. According to Global Footprint Network, humanity

is currently using the resources of 1.6 planets to provide the goods and services we demand when we only have one Earth.¹

Having said that, this submission will focus on the nature aspect of the Inquiry and we will be focussing on three elements:

1. Identifying the problem. Biodiversity is in decline. In Victoria much of that is held in private ownership. Urban and peri-urban areas support critical habitat for a range of endangered species.
2. Case Study. How a community in Torquay, Victoria is planning to save Spring Creek valley.
3. How Government can play a lead role.

1. Identifying the problem:

Victoria represents the most highly cleared state in Australia with approximately half of its former extent of native vegetation cleared for agriculture, mining and urban development since 1750 . Across the 14 million hectares of private land (two-thirds of Victoria), 80% of the former extent of native vegetation has been removed, particularly grasslands, chenopod shrublands, grassy woodlands, riverine woodlands and wetlands). As a consequence of this extensive habitat loss, most native vegetation on private land is classified by the state government as either endangered, vulnerable, rare or depleted. While broad-scale removal of native vegetation is now regulated, ***approximately 1200 ha of native woody vegetation and 3200 ha of grassland vegetation continues to be removed in Victoria every year***, principally in threatened woodland and grassland ecosystems.²

Further,

This incremental loss of native vegetation on private land is likely to continue as new land uses develop and new technologies emerge. **As has been shown repeatedly over the past 150 years, native vegetation clearance occurs in response to urban development**, and development of agriculture and mining.³

In another study by the Australian Conservation Foundation the problem of urban sprawl and subsequent habitat destruction was highlighted:

¹ <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/content/uploads/2020/09/LPR2020-Full-report-lo-res.pdf> (homepage summary)

² <https://www.trustfornature.org.au/images/uploads/conservation/SCP/Trust-for-Nature-Statewide-Conservation-Plan.pdf> p.17.

³ Ibid. p.18

Urban sprawl threatens species and their habitat in multiple and interconnected ways. The probability of a species being threatened with extinction increases with the percentage of its range that is urbanised. Urban sprawl increases pollution, invasive species, disease, inappropriate fire regimes, changes to water flows, car strikes, human-wildlife conflicts and, most significantly, fundamental changes to how land is used causes habitat destruction and fragmentation. Habitat destruction for urban sprawl in Australia's cities and towns is playing a significant role in worsening Australia's extinction crisis. In the first 17 years of the operation of the EPBC Act, at least 20,212 hectares of urban threatened species habitat was destroyed. This is an area equivalent to more than 11,400 MCG football grounds.⁴

Given biodiversity decline is accelerating and there is a direct correlation to habitat loss on private land; there is a lot riding on private land stewardship across Victoria. Indeed, if nature in Victoria is to thrive it will require a purposeful rethink by Victorian parliament to not only institute legal safeguards for nature on private land, but to actively encourage community to get involved as key change agents.

For private land this has been achieved in the past principally by supporting Landcare. Whilst Landcare serves a strategic role on farming land, its social network essentially runs through farming communities. On the coast, Coastcare supports conservation on public lands. However, fewer opportunities to contribute to conservation exist for communities in regional townships and in urban and peri-urban landscapes. They are largely left out of the equation. Indeed, a study by the Australian Conservation Foundation found that:

While our national parks and wilderness areas are essential for protecting biodiversity, our cities and towns also provide critical habitat for threatened species. In fact, 25% of Australia's nationally listed threatened plants and 46% of threatened animals can be found in our urban areas. While many of these species also have habitat outside cities and towns, for 39 threatened species, these urban areas are the last remaining places in which they exist.⁵

Further,

The prevalence of threatened species in our cities and towns challenges the misnomer that high conservation value ecosystems exist only in remote national parks or wilderness areas. While protecting large intact ecosystems is certainly important for protecting biodiversity, for many threatened species including several that are critically endangered, these urban areas are the last place where we can protect them within their original range.⁶

⁴

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/17703/attachments/original/1596500683/Extinction_crisis_in_cities_and_towns.pdf?1596500683 p.9.

⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

⁶ Ibid. p.8.

There are many instances where communities would relish the opportunity to play a much greater role in the custodianship of nature in their collective back yard. For state government the time has come to tap into that untapped enthusiasm.

2. Case Study:

Here in Torquay on the Surf Coast of Victoria we have been doing a lot of thinking about that and have developed an idea we think can serve as a model for other communities.

The idea in a nutshell is to strive for greater ecosystem functionality across 700 hectares of the Spring Creek valley, and at the same time enable the community to collectively purchase land as part of a Community-owned Land Trust. Ownership brings new energy and the collective enthusiasm of an entire community to the table. Here in Torquay the concept came about as a direct response to the future of Spring Creek valley. The Ecological Vegetation Class of almost the entire valley is Bellarine Yellow gum (*Eucalyptus leucoxylon* ssp. *bellarinensis*) Woodland; a Grassy Woodland officially described as Endangered and indicative of the precarious future facing peri-urban ecosystems outlined in the ACF report. The community has fought tirelessly for more than 12 years to save it from residential development. Now, with the creation of the Distinctive Area Landscape (DAL) process, the community not only has a real opportunity to stop a destructive land sub-division, but to also offer an alternative community-led vision about its and our future. Importantly, the focus of the plan is ecological restoration of Bellarine Yellowgum Woodland, along with the woodland birds and animals associated with it. (A detailed concept for how the community might purchase land within the Spring Creek valley corridor is shown as a separate attachment .) Development of the proposal and the ongoing battle to save Spring Creek is drawing lots of pro-bono support from our community. Together we are creating a compelling plan.

3. How Government can play a lead role:

Whilst the process for us is legally complex and slow, the process could be expedited if State Government considered ways in which it could establish Community Land Bank and Community Land Trust templates to help communities work through legal, financial and governance aspects associated with Community Land Trusts. In our experience there isn't a model or an exact precedent that's fit for purpose. In the meantime, entities like Trust for Nature, Bush Heritage and the ACT's publicly-owned Woodland's and Wetland's Trust, the Bunanyung Landscape Alliance in Ballarat, as well as Hepburn Community Windpark Co-operative in Daylesford have provided useful insights.

Urban Conservation and the need for new models:

A special source of inspiration has been 'Zealandia', a wildly successful urban valley wildlife restoration project in Wellington, New Zealand as it demonstrates how successful urban conservation programs can be; and in particular highlighting what a community can achieve when it puts its mind to it. The project has reintroduced over 20 species of native wildlife back into the area, some of which were previously absent from mainland New Zealand for over 100 years. (More details about Zealandia can be found here: <https://www.visitzealandia.com/>).

Saving Spring Creek is not the endgame; rather it's a starting point:

This submission has already highlighted the endangered status of Grassy Woodlands and Bellarine Yellow gum, noting that Bellarine Yellow gum is officially listed under the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. It is also worth underscoring that a Spring Creek valley flora and fauna report commissioned by the Surf Coast Shire revealed that:

There is suitable habitat within the study area for seven fauna species listed under the FFG Act (Swift Parrot, Grey-headed Flying-fox, Baillon's Crake, Lewin's Rail, Eastern Great Egret, White-footed Dunnart and Brown Toadlet).⁷

Two species, the Grey-headed Flying-fox and the Swift Parrot are also listed under the EPBC Act. Indeed, urban habitat destruction was the biggest threat to the vulnerable Grey-headed Flying Fox.⁸ Another three EPBC listed species, the Growling Grass Frog, Western Plains Galaxiella and Yarra Pygmy Perch were shown to meet modelling criteria. Indeed, the Growling Grass Frog is known by local residents to exist within 10km of the study area.

As climate change impacts begin to compound threats to our biodiversity, connecting and restoring habitats on private and public lands within well-managed landscapes will be fundamentally important for species survival. This necessary paradigm shift to mixed-used 'sustainable landscapes' could be accelerated with the right support from government.

In concluding, this document argues ecological restoration and ambition by community becomes possible as a new yardstick for success when the right policy frameworks and meaningful incentives are put in place to encourage widespread buy-in. It is worth considering that whilst our community is looking to save the nature of Spring Creek valley, we see a much bigger game at play in which communities in general are given license to play a much more substantive role in land stewardship. The challenge for our parliamentarians is to introduce a suitable model and a framework that engages communities as part of living in the 21st century.

⁷ Ecology and Heritage Partners Pty Ltd (Jan 2016). Biodiversity Assessment of the Spring Creek Urban Growth Area. Prepared for Surf Coast Shire. p. 31.

⁸ https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/17703/attachments/original/1596500683/Extinction_crisis_in_cities_and_towns.pdf?1596500683 p. 13.

In 1986 we saw the Victorian Premier Joan Kirner launch **Landcare**. In the early 1990s the Victorian Government also introduced **Coast Care**. Now in 2020 when clearly things are not going well for nature it's time to consider urban conservation using a suite of measures headed by Community Land Trusts to achieve the aim. In doing so it gives strong permission for all Victorians to actively support the State Government's 'Biodiversity 2037' goals to reverse biodiversity decline in Victoria.

If this document has generated any further interest or questions please feel free to contact the SCEG committee.

Thanking you for your time,
Graeme Stockton
(Chairperson Surf Coast Energy Group)