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Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

We commend the Victorian parliament for initiating this Inquiry into ecosystem decline.

Without a healthy and functioning natural environment there will be no long term viability for our economy, society or public health. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia - 66% of our land has been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants – and this Inquiry provides us with the opportunity to consider our past mistakes and successes and start planning for a future which will ensure thriving, connected ecosystems, and healthy human society and economy.

Friends of the Earth (Melbourne) is a membership-based environmental justice organisation which was established in 1974.

Introduction

We know that Victoria's ecosystems are under great stress. Apart from being the most cleared state in Australia, we have particular ecosystems that are at extreme risk because they have been heavily cleared and fragmented and are under-represented in the conservation estate, especially native grasslands. We also have rapidly emerging climate change impacts, which, if left unchecked, pose an existential threat to all ecosystems and our very way of life.

Over 700 native plants, animals, insects and ecosystems are under threat. 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are on the brink of extinction. For instance, of the 22 native freshwater fish nation wide described as having a '50/50' chance or worse of becoming extinct within two decades, the most threatened fish is Victoria's tiger-striped

shaw galaxias which, [experts concluded](#), had an 80% chance of being gone in 20 years time without immediate and meaningful action.

The 2018 Victorian State of the Environment report found that two-thirds of the state's indicators for land-based biodiversity were assessed as being 'poor'. We are sure that many scientists and researchers will provide the details of the species loss and ecological breakdown that is happening, so will focus most of our submission on potential solutions.

Whole of government decision making

One of the reasons we have so many environmental problems in Victoria is because major projects are often considered in isolation, rather than being placed in the context of overall ecological impacts or trends. For instance a specific proposal to widen a highway and remove roadside remnant vegetation might be considered acceptable in the assessment process. Yet when similar developments occur across the landscape, the cumulative impacts add up. It is essential we take a more holistic approach to environmental impacts and habitat fragmentation than has been traditionally applied in Victoria.

Last summer's fires and the COVID-19 pandemic have had a devastating impact on our economy. As the state government considers ways to rebuild the economy it is essential that it 'build back green'. We should properly apply the precautionary principle and apply it with the explicit lens of climate change impacts. This means halting support for developments tied to further development of fossil fuels and instead only supporting sustainable initiatives (for instance, supporting the Melbourne Metro 2 tunnel over the North East Link road project).

There would be significant benefits to using a holistic approach in government decision making in regards to Victoria's ecosystems, namely:

- We need healthy and diverse ecosystems to be able to counter climate heating.
- Healthy ecosystems are not only vital to wildlife but also to humans and our social and psychological well being.
- We need a sufficient percentage of Victoria to support diverse ecosystems for tourism, scientific and pharmaceutical discoveries yet to take place.
- A holistic approach would mean that we can perform ecosystem audits, that are vital to ensure we have sufficient environmental assets to maintain a sustainable environment for wildlife and people.

- Natural ecosystems and species have an intrinsic right to exist and representative portions of all bioregions should be included in a permanent reserve system.

Specific policy proposals

Get moving on emission reduction targets.

The government needs a plan to phase out our current reliance on burning coal, oil and gas, which is making the climate crisis worse and driving extreme events like heat waves, extended fire seasons and flooding, as quickly as possible.

The government needs to make a decision shortly about what Emission Reduction Targets (ERTs) it will set for the years 2025 and 2030. While this has, understandably, recently been deferred, it is essential that the government gets on with setting science-based ERTs. This would allow Victoria to play a role in the global efforts to keep global temperature rise under 1.5oC.

There have been numerous scientific publications, articles and books relating to the need for urgent emissions reductions, most of which call for higher ambition for emissions reductions, especially early action. The year 2050 is clearly too late for our goal of achieving net zero emissions. That is why the 2025 and 2030 targets are important as they need to set the direction for the rapid transformation of our economy. The benefits of reducing emissions is now known to exceed the economic cost of increasing emissions. It is also well known that Victoria stands to gain significant advantages if we tackle emissions reductions via transitioning jobs from old fossil fuel technologies to jobs in renewables, storage and energy efficiency. As well as this, there will be numerous ecological and health benefits when our environment is cleaner, in both metropolitan Melbourne and the Latrobe Valley.

Build back green. Here are some logical things the government could do to show it is serious about responding to climate change, and hence doing its part to reduce future impacts on natural ecosystems.

The October budget and post-COVID-19 stimulus package must invest in measures that rein in emissions and protect communities from intensifying climate impacts, such as:

- Set science based Emission Reduction Targets for 2025 and 2030.
- Upgrading the transmission grid to bring more solar, wind, and storage online, and help establish the country's first offshore wind farm.

- Bringing forward the Victorian Renewable Energy Target of 50% by 2030 to 2025, and establish a new target of 100% renewables by 2030.
- Funding the installation of rooftop solar and storage on all public buildings such as schools, hospitals, libraries, fire stations, and SES facilities.
- Retrofitting public libraries, schools, community centres, neighbourhood houses, and sporting clubs in regional and peri-urban areas to become Climate Emergency Refuge Centres in times of crisis.
- Building new, high-performance public housing for vulnerable people in our community.
- Upgrading the Victorian building and planning standards so that any new buildings are carbon neutral or better.
- Investing in a new fleet of Victorian-made trains, trams, and electric buses.
- Upgrading the public transport network to improve accessibility for everyone in the community.
- Upgrading and providing more pedestrian and cycle paths and routes, including bicycle parking and repair bays or cafes along the routes in order that more people can walk or ride to school, work, shops, etc safely.

For additional ideas on 'green recovery' measures the state government could adopt please check our *COVID-19: Blueprint for Climate Justice* document, [available here](#).

Prioritise First Nation communities

The rights and interests of Traditional Custodians should be recognised in all aspects of land and water management, as well as decision-making in relation to their traditional lands.

The government should continue to support traditional management practices such as cultural fire.

Government should continue to support traditional custodians in their efforts to train and educate indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in these practices. Over the long term, expanding the use of traditional land practices as well as cultural burning has the potential to improve our ecosystems so that we have fewer instances of extreme bushfires such as we experienced in the 2019/2020 bushfire period.

Fund our conservation estate. Victoria has a wonderful range of national and state parks, that protect ecosystems from the inland rivers and semi arid zones to the highest peaks.

However, these reserves do not receive enough funding. Currently, national parks and reserves receive less than 0.5% of state government expenditure. In the face of a growing local extinction crisis, we need to significantly ramp up investment in nature.

Park managers need significantly more funding for core frontline capacity to deal with the many pressures placed on parks, particularly for pest plant and animal control.

Complete the reserve system

Victoria does have a World Class parks system. However there are still gaps:

Western VIC: Forest and woodlands on public land in the west of the state (roughly west of the Hume Highway) are fragmented remnants of bush, often surrounded by a sea of cleared farmland. These are important patches of bushland, and some are threatened by logging, mining and poor management.

Around 40% of Victoria's native land-based mammals, birds and amphibians are largely restricted to fragmented landscapes in the west and north of the state. A further 45% rely on them as a major part of their distribution in Victoria.

There are 20 state forests in the central west of the state, including the Wombat (near Daylesford), Wellsford (near Bendigo), Mt Cole (west of Ballarat) and Pyrenees that are in need of better protection and management.

Grasslands of Victoria's Volcanic Plains:

Volcanic grasslands are the rarest habitat type in our state. Once covering almost a third of Victoria, now less than 5% remains.

A decade ago, in a rush to clear the way to 'streamline' approvals for property development and Melbourne's growth, the state and federal governments agreed to a deal (called the Melbourne Strategic Assessment), which allowed about 6,000 hectares of grasslands within the 'urban growth boundary' to be cleared.

In exchange for this clearing, developers were to pay a levy, which was then to be used to purchase large grassland reserves outside the urban growth boundary – an 'offset'. These reserves were supposed to be largely delivered by 2020 – but these promises have been broken. To date:

- only 10% of designated land has been acquired for the Western Grassland Reserve.
- no land has been acquired for the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve.

There is also significant evidence that the quality of the grasslands being protected in the reserves is not of the same quality as some of the grasslands being cleared. Poor oversight and poor monitoring are among a raft of other issues with the implementation of this deal.

We call for an urgent examination of how to prioritise acquisition, protection and management of our critically endangered grasslands.

Important remnants should be protected

There are various pockets of significant remnant bush which are held in private hands which are at risk which should be protected in reserves: for instance the Lang lang Proving Ground.

Inland Rivers: In November 2009, the Victorian Parliament gave the green light for the creation of almost 100,000 hectares of new river red gum national parks from Lake Hume to the South Australian border. This announcement provided unprecedented protection for forest and wetland systems along our inland rivers. And for the first time in Victoria, Aboriginal traditional owners attained co-management of new national parks and formal recognition of their ancient and ongoing cultural connection to these protected landscapes.

The missing link in this system is the Murray River Park. Dotted between the Barmah, Gunbower, Lower Goulburn River and Warby Range-Ovens River is a series of small reserves collectively known as the Murray River Park.

It is not a formal park, and cattle are still licensed to graze, and damage sensitive wetlands and pollute the river.

These small reserves were meant to form a link between larger protected areas that stretch from near the South Australian border across to the Hattah-Kulkyne, Gunbower, Barmah and Warby Range-Ovens River national parks.

The government should declare the Murray River Park.

Protect ecological climate refuges

Climate change threatens biodiversity in all ecosystems. In creating a conservation reserve system which is fit for purpose for a time of climate change, a priority is to identify areas and habitats — *refuges* — that could shelter species from the worst impacts.

Freshwater ecosystems contain high biodiversity, but are especially vulnerable to climatic changes due to their limited extent and connectivity. And some forested areas, such as Mt Toorongo in the Central Highlands, and the Errinundra Plateau in east Gippsland have acted as climate refuges before. In light of last summer's fires, it is clear that remaining cool temperate and warm temperate rainforests in the state require additional levels of protection.

In completing the state's reserve system, the government should consider the role of possible future climate refuges. Identifying, protecting and managing refuges must be a key component of future conservation planning and policy.

We need a huge investment in weed and invasive species eradication

Victoria is overrun by weeds and invasive animals, which kill and out-compete our native plants and wildlife. Managing numbers is essential for restoring habitat. The government already has programs to humanely manage introduced animals like cats, wild dogs, deer, horses, rabbits and foxes. These programs require additional funds.

We should also build the capacity for the community to be involved in government control programs, where appropriate. One example, which could be replicated for other species, is the program to control Hawkweed from the Bogong High Plains. For many years, summer field trips have been organised where volunteers join with Parks Victoria staff to identify and remove Hawkweed. These sorts of programs have various benefits: direct ecological outcomes, greater community understanding of the threats posed by invasive species, and a sense of ownership/ involvement in seeking solutions to the problems posed by these species. It also provides good value for money to achieve ecological outcomes, as volunteers provide a considerable proportion of the actual physical work.

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:

- Bring forward the plan to end native forest logging and immediately start the transition to a pulp and timber industry which is not reliant on native forests. Two immediate priorities are protection of unburnt Greater Glider habitat, and a continued moratorium on logging in East Gippsland. No amount of planting can replace carbon lost in logging the world's most carbon dense terrestrial forest for paper. There is already \$120 million allocated under the timber industry transition plan and a previous amount of \$110 million allocated in the 2017/18 budget to establish new plantations. These projects should be fast tracked. This will create employment in both seedling establishment, land preparation and tree planting. Agricultural sources of fibre should also be considered as they may offer additional benefits to farmers in Gippsland and short production time frames.
- The government should rule out salvage logging of burnt areas because of the negative ecological impacts of such activity.
- The state government must urgently implement and properly resource Action Statements (plans for recovery) for all threatened plants and wildlife. Victoria's plants and wildlife are at risk, with over 2,000 recognised as threatened with extinction however only 15% have Action Statements.
- It should stop unsustainable hunting of native wildlife – for instance, native duck shooting or over-fishing.
- It should stop destructive and unnecessary developments like the proposed Westernport gas ship terminal, the Kalbar mineral sands project in East Gippsland, and gold mining proposed for the Wombat Forest.

Managing bushfire risks

Climate change is one of the gravest risks to our environment and human society. As a result of climate change, we are facing longer and more intense fire seasons, which requires additional capacity to fight fires.

In the short term, last summer's fires have worsened the outlook for natural ecosystems, and increased the need for the government to act. They:

- Burned 1.4 million hectares in Victoria
- 31% of VIC's rainforests have burnt, as well as 24% of wet or damp forests, and 34% of lowland forests

- 100% of the potential habitat of East Gippsland galaxias (a small native fish) have burnt
- 40% of sooty owl, long-footed potoroo, diamond python, brush-tailed rock-wallaby and long-nosed bandicoot habitat has burnt

Yet the government has announced that it will allow 'salvage' logging in more than 3,000 hectares of fire affected forests. Multiple independent, peer reviewed studies show that logging forests after bushfires increases future fire risk and can render the forest uninhabitable for wildlife for decades or even centuries.

As was shown last summer, it is clear we simply do not have enough capacity to fight the fires that are emerging because of climate change. In Australia we rely on sharing crews and appliances between regions and states and overseas. With fire seasons starting earlier and lasting longer, there is a real chance that existing volunteer and career firefighters will simply not be able to sustain firefighting efforts for six months at a time. This will have impacts on both local and interstate firefighting efforts. We need additional resources.

Some ideas for state government action include:

- the state government should increase funding for Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) firefighters, including funding extra arduous and remote area firefighters (including rappel crews) and increased air capacity for fighting fires
- the government should provide annual funding to purchase firefighting aircraft to increase our fire fighting capacity and reduce the need to contract aircraft from interstate or overseas
- in addition to funding additional FFMV remote area teams, we propose a new volunteer remote area fire force be established, similar to the Remote Area Fire Teams (RAFT) model in NSW, based within the CFA. This should be structured to offer opportunities for younger and urban based people to join fire fighting efforts. Training could occur in metropolitan areas, and brigades formed in urban areas which could then be deployed as strike times in fire season. This could provide a significant boost to the state's fire fighting capacity
- Where fuel reduction treatments are used, we would recommend that smaller areas are burnt. We also suggest that the government consider the proposal to establish local volunteer GreenFire groups to work with land managers on fuel reduction and fuel load management, which might also involve the use of non fire techniques and aim to deliver ecological benefits. Having local people and

conservation organisations involved in planning and delivering fuel reduction programs would increase community support for these efforts.