



Newham & District Landcare Group

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30 August 2020

Submission by Newham & District Landcare Group (NDLG) to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria, Environment and Planning Committee of the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament

Via email to ecosystems@parliament.vic.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Inquiry. Our submission is long, but we wish to make the points outlined. Recommendations are listed on a separate page at the end.

Newham & District Landcare Group (NDLG) in the Macedon Ranges is one of many Landcare groups energetically working on programs relating to biodiversity and catchment management. Biolinks, weed control and water quality are major foci. We work on both public and private land. The Campaspe-Maribyrnong Headwaters Biolink is our key strategic focus; it is a key area within Victoria as a whole, enabling connectivity between the Wombat Forest and the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative, taking in the Cobaw Range, Macedon Regional Park, Hanging Rock, and The Jim. Since late 2005 we have actively sought Government funding to support on-ground works within the Biolink area, resulting to date in an investment of more than \$1 million. This is made up of \$521,760 in grant monies, and over \$600,000 in matching contributions.

The terms of reference for this Inquiry are broad, listed here as a) to f). Our submission will address them individually.

a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts

Victoria has a shocking biodiversity record. The health of our environment in Victoria is declining.

We know from the *Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report* (<https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-environment-2018>) that most biodiversity indicators are poor and trending downwards, with significant declines in 21 out of 35 biodiversity indicators. No indicators are rated good; 60% were in poor health. The *State of the Forests: 2018 Report* chapter (<https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-forests-2018>) estimated that forest cover in Victoria has been reduced to around 30% to 40% of what it was in past Aboriginal times. Add to this the further recent bushfire which affected about 70 percent of the state's remaining warm temperate rainforest and more than half the habitat of at least 170 rare and threatened species. (*Victoria's bushfire emergency: biodiversity response and recovery, Preliminary Report – Version 1, DEWLP, 2020*)

An annual scorecard released on 3 April 2020 by ANU's Centre for Water and Landscape Dynamics reveals the worst environmental conditions in many decades. Nationally, Australia's environmental condition score fell by 2.3 points in 2019, to a very low 0.8 out of ten. (*Australia's Environment in 2019*)

<https://www.wenfo.org/aer/>). The score is calculated as the average rankings of component scores: inundation, streamflow, vegetation growth, leaf area, soil protection, tree cover and the number of hot days. It confirms the devastating damage global warming and mismanagement are wreaking on our natural resources. The summary score for the Macedon Ranges LGA shows that its overall environmental score (out of 10) was 2.7, down from 4.8 in 2018; woody vegetation cover was below average. This was before the impacts of this summer's drought and devastating bushfires when in Victoria more than 1.2 million hectares of forest was burnt. While our region in the Macedon Ranges was spared bushfires last season, it remains one of the most fire-prone in the country, to be exacerbated by increasing dangers of climate change. Our higher-elevation areas of Victoria, and unique geological features, will be especially important climate refuges for plant and animal species.

We argue strongly that the personal and economic wellbeing of all Victorians is dependent on the health of the natural environment, and submit that as biodiversity continues to rapidly decline, habitats become more stressed, species become more threatened, and the climate crisis escalates. Biodiversity underpins the benefits people derive from the natural environment, such as water filtration, carbon storage, soil stabilisation, not to mention less tangible values like spirituality and cultural identity.

b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species

The inadequacies of both the federal and state legislative framework are manifest. Some examples follow.

Grasslands

'Natural Temperate Grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plain' and 'Grassy Woodlands of the Victorian Volcanic Plain' are both listed under national environmental laws as 'critically endangered' – which is the step before extinction in the wild. They are home to 32 threatened flora and 25 threatened fauna listed under national environmental laws.

In 2010 the Victorian Government made commitments to improve conservation outcomes, including to establish a 15,000-hectare Western Grassland Reserve and a 1,200-hectare Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands Reserve by 2020 to offset Melbourne's urban expansion. These promises to protect the grasslands of Victoria's Volcanic Plains by 2020 have been broken, as illustrated by the scathing assessment of the Victorian Government's delivery of the scheme in the Victorian Auditor-General's Report *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands* released in June (<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/protecting-critically-endangered-grasslands>). We quote "*The delays in acquiring these reserves also mean they will likely require a significantly greater investment to restore and retain these ecological values than if they had been purchased within the intended 10-year timeframe*" (p8). The potential costs of pending lawsuits against the Government will make matters worse.

NDLG recommends immediate action on promises to protect Victoria's endangered grassland reserves.

Forests

Newham & District Landcare Group (NDLG) made two of the 3000 community submissions to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) Central West investigation into Public Lands. We are dismayed and frankly appalled that no action has been taken to act on the recommendations of the final report released on 21 June 2019, not even responding by the legally required deadline of 20 February 2020.

We do not repeat the many arguments and benefits of declaring new national and state parks, they are well canvassed by Victorian National Parks Association and many other organisations. Suffice to use VEAC's own words about the Wombat–Lerderderg area close to us:

The recommended Wombat–Lerderderg National Park covers 49,553 hectares comprised of a large part (29,079 hectares) of the existing Wombat State Forest, the Lerderderg State Park (20,469 hectares) and small areas of in other public land use categories. It contains much of the only largely intact landscape between the Grampians and the eastern highlands, and the only extensive area of very high Strategic Biodiversity Values (SBVs) in the whole investigation area. The recommended park contains large areas of under-represented EVCs (most notably, Herb-rich Foothill Forest and Herb-rich and Shrubby Foothill Forest Complex). It provides high value habitat for many threatened species such as the small sickle greenhood orchid, wombat bossiaea, square tailed kite, powerful owl, brush-tailed phascogale and greater glider, and is the largest block of habitat in western Victoria for species such as the red-browed treecreeper, common wombat and mountain brushtail possum. The headwaters of five of the six major rivers in the existing state forest are included in the recommended Wombat– Lerderderg National Park (VEAC 2019, p75).

It is dismaying that mining exploration and logging are escalating in the very same areas proposed for protection in the Central West forests. Protests from local communities and conservation groups are well publicised. Just one example is the risk from logging to the rare and threatened Mount Cole Grevillea (*Grevillea montis–cole ssp. montis–cole*), found here and nowhere else on earth, which has already suffered a 75% decline, largely from logging.

NDLG supports the recommendations of VEAC for reclassification of the specified national and state parks and reserves, which would improve both recreational use and enhanced protection for flora and fauna.

By re-signing Regional Forest Agreements the State Government-owned body VicForests is made exempt from federal laws against logging. The Federal Court found in May this year that VicForests breached its own code of conduct and therefore environmental laws when they razed the habitat of the critically endangered Leadbeater’s possum and the threatened Greater Glider in the Central Highlands. On 24 August Justice Mortimer of the Federal Court of Australia granted injunctions to stop VicForests logging 66 areas of this forest. Justice Mortimer's orders also awarded costs against VicForests, meaning that they must pay Friends of Leadbeater's Possum's costs.

It should not be up to environmental groups to take on State Government failings. To quote Bob Brown (*Saturday Paper* 22-28 August 2020 p5), “As with whaling in 1978, the time for logging Australia’s wildlife-filled and carbon-rich forests is up”.

NDLG recommends bringing forward earlier than 2030 cessation of logging in all old-growth native forests, and switching to plantation timber.

Native species

More than 80 species of flora are listed as vulnerable to completely extinct in central Victoria. Recovery plans under current laws have failed to be implemented. Small land clearing actions which are highly damaging do not trigger compliance responses from either Federal or State agencies.

In our area of the Macedon Ranges we have two vegetation communities and 18 species that are currently listed under the EBPC Act, and 24 species endangered or critically endangered under the Victorian State Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (listed at page 12 of Macedon Ranges Shire Council’s excellent *Biodiversity Strategy 2018* (<https://www.mrsc.vic.gov.au/About-Council/Our-Council/Strategies-Plans/Biodiversity-Strategy>)). This local government strategy comprehensively identifies policy and planning initiatives, priorities for community engagement, on ground action and monitoring actions for each objective - aimed at protection and enhancement of biodiversity values across the Shire.

Local Landcare groups, organisations like Wombat Forestcare, and the Macedon Ranges Shire Council’s environment department are leading efforts to protect species and their habitat in the Macedon Ranges. Just a few examples are nesting boxes, monitoring, and feral animal control to protect the Greater Glider

and the Brush-tailed Phascogale which as hollow-dwelling species are vulnerable to fire and logging; Landcare protection and propagation of the federally listed *Lepidium hyssopifolium* s.s (Basalt Peppergrass), *Dianella amoena* (Matted Flax-lily) and *Eucalyptus aggregata* (Black Gum).

Federal laws

Since federal laws were introduced in 1999, the list of threatened species and ecosystems has grown by more than a third – from 1483 to 1874. Australia’s world-record rate of extinctions is expected to continue on the same trajectory due to land clearing, habitat degradation, bushfire and continued pressure from feral animals (*The Age*, quoting University academics, 21 July 2020 p12).

The Australian Auditor General published on 25 June 2020 a damning report on federal handling of the Environmental Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC) Act. *Referrals, Assessments and Approvals of Controlled Actions under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (<https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/referrals-assessments-and-approvals-controlled-actions-under-the-epbc-act>) found that the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment’s administration of the laws is neither efficient nor effective.

Since then the interim report of the Federal Government’s own review by Graeme Samuel of its EPBC Act shows it to be dated, inefficient and not fit for the purpose, concluding “*It does not enable the Commonwealth to protect and conserve environmental matters that are important to the nation.*” Federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley has already dismissed one of Samuel’s key recommendations: “*An independent compliance and enforcement regulator, that is not subject to actual or implied political direction from the Commonwealth Minister, should be established*”. She proposes to keep compliance in-house in the federal Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. This department is seriously under-resourced having been subject to federal cuts of 39.7% between 2013 and 2019; in-house compliance administration leaves the way open for Ministerial discretion, powerful lobbyists, perceived conflicts of interest and potential corruption.

The Minister and Prime Minister have also pre-empted process to streamline environmental approvals, and flagged introducing “prototype”, ie imprecise, environmental standards, with no increased funding to the States. It makes no sense to devolve responsibility for a “single touch” regime of project approvals to States, which are already failing comprehensively on environmental protection. It defies comprehension why Minister Lily d’Ambrosio has been quoted as countenancing the federal proposition to take on *more* powers when her Department (DELWP) has failed to manage affairs in Victoria. Particularly with no extra resources forthcoming.

Federal and State Government failures to prosecute breaches of land clearing, indigenous grassland destruction, water use (witness the Murray-Darling Basin) does not make suggestions of less red or “green tape” attractive.

NDLG urges the State Government to back the Review’s recommendation for “an independent compliance and enforcement regulator” to oversee compliance with national environmental laws

NDLG urges the State Government to refuse Federal proposals to streamline environmental approvals without extra federal funding.

c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems

Resourcing for both government programs and funding is inadequate. To stop the decline of native species in Victoria greater funding, monitoring and recovery plans are needed.

The Central Victorian Biolinks Alliance for example in 2018 made the point that *“the environment has gotten worse, funding has gotten worse and climate change has gotten worse... For central Victoria, monitoring is, so far as we know, largely done by citizen science groups such as members of Birdlife Australia, Nature Watch or by academia.”* <https://biolinksalliance.org.au/news/2018/10/17/alliance-calls-for-more-funding-amp-better-research-to-halt-species-extinction>

Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037 is a plan launched in 2017 to work with communities, scientists, Traditional Owners and non-government investors to stop the decline of our biodiversity and achieve overall biodiversity improvement over the next 20 years. We note the projects for on-ground biodiversity management actions in the 11 geographic areas being used for DELWP’s Biodiversity Response Planning (BRP) (<https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/biodiversity-response-planning>). We submit much greater resourcing is needed to meet the worthy goals and to undertake greater research, monitoring and surveys post the 2019-20 bushfires. Through the BRP process there has been limited opportunity for Landcare groups and networks to access multi-year funding for landscape-scale projects. \$3.198m is currently allocated for 8 projects over the next 3 years in the large area of Port Philip/Westernport, with as yet no representation of projects in the Macedon Ranges and nearby.

Victorian Landcare grants are only available for 12 – 18 month periods with a limit of \$20,000.

NDLG recommends significantly greater investment in multi-year projects, as there has been in the past with Communities for Nature and Biodiversity on-ground action projects

Pest plants and animals are a threat to biodiversity. Landcare groups are active in weed and rabbit control. Foxes, cats, deer, pigs and goats are known problems to native flora and wildlife in all local forests and parks, and intrude onto adjoining private land, causing further damage to agricultural values and native vegetation. Feral horses cause enormous damage to habitat in alpine parks. Deer should be removed from the list of protected “game” under the Wildlife Act 1975 and declared a “pest” species under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994.

NDLG recommends allocation of additional resources and more aggressive management for pest plant and animal control programs in forests and public and private land, and declaring deer a pest species under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994

Roadsides and road reserves are significant areas of public land managed by VicRoads or local government. We argue that they deserve better protection due to identification of endangered species, important remnant vegetation and as connectivity corridors. However current management by local government and VicRoads contractors is causing incremental, ongoing damage. NDLG’s Roadside Management Group from 2005 to date has recorded over 551 volunteer hours weeding local roadsides, has identified several endangered flora species, and paid for ecological roadside surveys. Our reputation for actively campaigning for roadside protection has resulted in the forthcoming publication of an article in the DELWP’s next *Victorian Landcare Magazine* on roadsides, rail reserves and walking trails.

NDLG recommends better protection of roadside reserves and restoration of funding for ecological work to Vic Roads.

We have outlined above many of the actions of non-government groups in trying to protect biodiversity. It is unfair to rely on the volunteer labour force of committed conservation and environmental groups like Landcare and Friends groups, Connecting Country, Central Victorian Biolinks Alliance, Wombat Forestcare, which do a magnificent job. Their volunteer workforce is frankly an ageing one. Nor is it appropriate to rely on philanthropic organisations like Bush Heritage or Trust for Nature. They are always scrambling for funding and donations.

NDLG recommends greatly increased resourcing and funding for monitoring, compliance, recovery plans and community projects to protect diversity.

d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts

Addressed under other Terms of Reference.

e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

First People's connections to country have important lessons for environmental policy and processes; cultural values and practices are increasingly being recognised by landowners and land managers as important in present day land and natural resource management. Cultural sites are insufficiently protected, as witnessed by damage to sites in the Grampians for example, and the rejection of the Djaab Wurrung application to protect culturally significant trees on the Western Highway this August.

One area where we can learn from First Nation traditional practices is in bushfire risk management.

Climate change is exacerbating extreme drought and heat, dry fuels and soils which all increase bushfire risk. According to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) preliminary bushfire report summary, the fires (at 11 January 2020) had impacted at least 60 percent of over 50 national parks and nature reserves in Victoria. The bushfires affected about 70 percent of the state's remaining warm temperate rainforest and more than half the habitat of at least 170 rare and threatened species. (*Victoria's bushfire emergency: biodiversity response and recovery, Preliminary Report – Version 1, DELWP, 2020*)

Current methods of hazard reduction burning are controversial, ineffective in the face of catastrophic fires, and counterproductive for biodiversity protection. There is much to be learned from traditional Aboriginal fire practices, often termed cultural burning. See for example

<https://environmentvictoria.org.au/2020/05/05/2020-fire-season-submission-into-the-victorian-investigation/>

NDLG recommends that the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy launched in 2019 be implemented and extended with adequate resourcing, with the State taking an active role in raising public awareness and perception around cultural fire techniques.

The Wurdi Youang 369 hectare reserve, owned by the Geelong-based Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative "offers an Aboriginal approach to grassland protection and restoration, with intrinsic cultural and environmental benefits" (*The Age* 27 July 2020). Ironically this reserve is among areas slated to be included in the Western Grassland Reserve, one of the critically endangered grasslands the State Government has failed to protect, as outlined on page 2. The co-operative's work on hot burns to remove weeds, mosaic burning to put charcoal in the soil, management of invasive species, removal of sheep, working with the CSIRO on native grass seeds for gluten-free, protein rich flour, and protection of an Aboriginal stone astronomical arrangement provide a model to learn from, and should surely persuade the Planning Minister to remove the acquisition overlay on the reserve so it remains under Aboriginal ownership.

NDLG believes that conservation and rehabilitation of our environment should have a central role to play in Australia's plan for jobs and the COVID-19 recovery, as witnessed by many calls for a green-led recovery. A well-designed conservation program would boost regional employment, target weeds and pests, revitalise

our rivers, reduce emissions, support regenerative agriculture, restore habitat and build resilience in bushfire affected areas.

Ernst and Young released a report on 1 July for an alliance of over 70 conservation, farming and land management groups. Called 'Delivering economic stimulus through the conservation and land management sector' (<https://alca.org.au/delivering-economic-stimulus-through-the-conservation-and-land-management-sector/>) it calls for an environment stimulus package to create tens of thousands of jobs in depressed rural and regional communities and save millions in welfare payments, potentially outstripping gains from public investment in large scale infrastructure projects. It finds that a \$4 billion national conservation and land management employment program would create 53,000 jobs, reduce welfare costs by \$620 million and raise economic output by \$5.7 billion over the next four years, with economic gains rising to \$9.3 billion over the next 20 years. What an opportunity to train and employ young and unemployed people, and Indigenous Australians - taking note for example of successful ranger and fire management programs in First Nations areas of northern Australia.

It is just the latest of several analyses (e.g. in <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/29/australia-could-create-hundreds-of-thousands-of-jobs-by-accelerating-shift-to-zero-emissions-report>) to have found there is a strong economic case for post-Covid stimulus measures to be designed to also help the environment.

NDLG urges the State Government to focus on a jobs-led recovery via action and research on renewable energy and emissions reduction, environmental monitoring and protection, fire management, river restoration, regenerative agriculture, and ecological tourism.

f) Other matters

The natural environment has been under-valued economically, though it provides enormous economic and social benefits to society.

We all need to recognise that economic growth is more than GDP and other economic measures used, but includes important indicators of well-being. Economic progress is said to improve our standard of living, it is argued that with enough economic growth, we will have the resources to look after the environment (the environmental Kuznets curve e.g. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/.../environmental-kuznets-curve>) but this has proven to be untrue except in a few cases. This very progress has been proven to lead to degradation of both the environment and social wellbeing.

Too often the debate is framed in terms of economy vs. environment, whereas a conscientious approach towards sustainable development, like using green technologies, would lead to a better and an economically prosperous world. Relying on temporary solutions like issuing monetary packages to solve environmental problems is not enough, nor is merely imposing rules and setting guidelines to conserve the environment. Helping people to change the mindset towards a judicious use of natural resources is what is needed. The current coronavirus pandemic shows that as individuals, and collectively, we and policy makers can take dramatic action once we acknowledge the urgency of a threat. Addressing environmental decline will cost less than the far greater long-term costs of not acting.

It is time to stop privileging economic productivity over the environment. A healthy environment is a prerequisite for a healthy economy and social wellbeing.

Yours faithfully



Helen Scott
Secretary, Newham & District Landcare Group

Summary of recommendations by Newham & District Landcare Group

- **NDLG recommends immediate action on promises to protect Victoria's endangered grassland reserves**
- **NDLG supports the recommendations of VEAC for reclassification of the specified national and state parks and reserves, which would improve both recreational use and enhanced protection for flora and fauna**
- **NDLG recommends bringing forward earlier than 2030 cessation of logging in all old-growth native forests and switching totally to plantation timber**
- **NDLG urges the State Government to support the EBPC Act Review's recommendation for "*an independent compliance and enforcement regulator*" to oversee compliance with national environmental laws**
- **NDLG urges the State Government to refuse Federal proposals to streamline environmental approvals without extra federal funding**
- **NDLG recommends significantly greater investment in multi-year projects, as there has been in the past with Communities for Nature and Biodiversity on-ground action projects**
- **NDLG recommends allocation of additional resources and more aggressive management for pest plant and animal control programs in forests and public and private land, and declaring deer a pest species under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994**
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