

Submission to the Inquiry into Victoria's 2019-20 Fire Season, by Regional Victorians OTDS

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our views and recommendations.

Victoria has suffered extensively as a result of catastrophic fires which sadly are predicted by scientists to become more frequent and more intense.

It is regional communities more than anyone, who will feel the impacts.

Regional Victorians OTDS represents Victorians who live and work in rural areas who are concerned with the mistreatment of our natural assets and the impact it has on our lives.

Aside from the direct threat to our families and animals of injury or death from fire, our *economic* survival depends on our natural habitats and wildlife populations remaining healthy.

Tourism contributes more to Australia's economy than agriculture, forestry and fishing (Tourism Satellite Account). Nature based tourism is the fastest growing component (*Unlocking the Great Outdoors*, Tourism and Transport Forum).

Many regional communities already rely on tourism to survive. As manufacturing and agriculture become less predictable, more will do so.

Our often unique and extremely valuable tourism attractions are our stunning landscapes, parks and wildlife. They must be protected as priority.

Our Terrifying Current Reality

While Australia is home to some of the most amazing wildlife species on earth, many found nowhere else in the world, they are being killed off at a rate unmatched by any other country in the developed world.

Australia is one of seven countries responsible for 60% of global biodiversity loss between 1996-2008, and has the highest rate of mammalian extinction in the world.

Fires which wipe out over a billion animals in a single season, do not help.

"Six Million Hectares of Threatened Species Habitat Up in Smoke" The Conversation
January 2020

Plants and animals that weren't incinerated in recent fires, survived only to die of exhaustion, starvation or predation. Fragmented remaining habitat means it will be harder for species for recover.

“I trained for a fire but this was not ‘just a fire’ because you expect to have a fire front, but you didn’t have a fire front – this fire was everywhere,”

The Threatened Species Commissioner recently told the royal commission that the 19/20 bushfires were an “ecological disaster” for wildlife, putting previously “secure” populations at risk. The Expert Panel identified 119 animal species in need of “urgent management intervention” after the fires.

“Climate change means bushfires are increasing in frequency and severity and damp parts of the landscape are now burning with a devastating impact on flora and fauna” Prof Mike Clarke, La Trobe University

“Australia is home to a 10th of global species and is seen by many as synonymous with pristine coastal areas and an outback brimming with nature. However the country is increasingly exposed to rising sea levels, floods, heat waves, bushfires and drought”
Anthony Cox, OECD/s Deputy Environment Director

Governments, including the Victorian state government, are letting it happen because there is no longer any question about the links between climate change, coal and deforestation.

“Scientists publicise their research demonstrating extremely serious and potentially irreversible damage to ecosystems – all ignored by governments”. Independent Australia, July 2019

A Report published in July 2019 claimed Australia’s rising coal and gas exports, combined with domestic emissions, could be responsible for 17% of the planet’s carbon emissions by 2030.

Australia’s record on emissions and sustainability condemned by OECD review

Amongst its findings, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development last year found Australia was one of the most carbon intensive economies in the OECD and that taxes on transport fuels were low compared to those of other countries. In fact, tax refunds mean “fuels are largely untaxed outside of transport and coal is fully untaxed”.

“Australia you’re being irresponsible to the extreme”

A newscorp survey of 30 scientists showed overwhelmingly they agreed Australia wasn’t doing enough about our “existential threat to civilization”.

Per a 2017 report from the World Bank and the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, extreme natural disasters inflict global damages of roughly \$520 billion a year, driving an estimated 26 million people into poverty annually.

An analysis authored by former fossil fuel executive and backed by former head of Australia’s military, warns *“Even for 2’C of warming, more than a billion people may need*

to be relocated and in high-end scenarios, the scale of destruction is beyond our capacity to model, with a high likelihood of human civilization coming to an end.”

Worsening storms and floods, longer droughts, hotter, drier summers, are some of the repercussions we are already experiencing as a result *of just 1’ rise in temperature.*

On current trends, Earth is on track to warm to an unliveable three or four degrees celsius above pre-industrial levels, far above the 1.5C climate-safe threshold endorsed by the UN.

In a feature published just after Christmas 2019, The Washington Post cited the horrific damage inflicted on Australia’s environment by climate change. ***“On land, Australia’s rising heat is apocalyptic. In the oceans it’s worse”.*** It spoke of how our native possums and flying foxes – already endangered - were falling dead out of trees in heat waves and how kelp forests – CO2 eaters– had been obliterated. ***“This is happening even though average atmospheric temperatures in Australia have not as yet risen by 2’c. “***

Of Australian political parties who appear to be becoming less and less esteemed around the world, James Dyke of University of Exeter wrote in The Independent newspaper ***“The greatest gift they could give to Australians and the rest of the world would be to radically rethink their ideological attachment to this fossil fuel (coal.)”***

“Australia’s government is resisting growing calls for a more ambitious response to climate change, even as the country battles devastating bushfires triggered by record temperatures that have sent air pollution to critical levels” Al Jazeera 23/12/19

“Climate Change is already having a serious effect on Victoria’s environment, a landmark state government report leaked to The Age has warned, generating more extreme weather, less rainfall and snow cover, warmer sea surface temperatures, rising sea levels and the threat of greater bushfires”. The Age March 2019

While the planet is losing a wooded area the size of Greece every year, reducing earth’s capacity to absorb co2 and releasing huge amounts of planet warming gas into the air, in Australia, habitat loss is the number one threat to three quarters of our country’s threatened species.

Australia, now known as a global deforestation hotspot – the only one in the developed world – is bulldozing a staggering 45 million animals a year in Queensland alone.



The latest State of the Environment Report *for Victoria* reveals that the local environment is being degraded at the hands of humans at a greater rate than it is being conserved elsewhere.

In Victoria there are four major coal mines and It's estimated that nearly five football fields of native forest are logged in Victoria each day, according to a policy paper published last year by the Australian Greens.

Extracts from an article on MongaBay in May 2020;

"Yet, in Victoria and New South Wales, the two Australian states that were affected the most by the fires, logging companies have continued to saw down swaths of native trees to produce paper pulp for toilet tissue and paper towels. In Victoria, where fires raged through more than 1.2 million hectares (3 million acres) of land, a regional forestry agreement (RFA) was recently renewed for 10 years, allowing the state's own logging company, VicForests to oversee and manage logging in the state, including logging inside the critically endangered mountain ash forest ecosystem. "

"The Victorian Government is in breach of its own forest laws, allowing logging on steep slopes and putting lives at risk, according to researchers from The Australian National University (ANU). The researchers say the breaches are serious, widespread and have been committed over the last 15 years. They warn it also increases the risk of major fire."

And there are long lasting if not permanent effects of fire, exacerbating the vicious cycle.

"yes the Australian bush is recovering from bushfires – but it may never be the same"

Regrowing forests uses a lot of water which will affect species in forested areas. This compounds a trend towards less rainfall under climate change.

And, as scientists' melted cameras recently revealed, wetlands and the life which depends on them are far from immune to the effects of fire.

"After the fires, heavy rain in denuded burnt catchments produced water laden with sediment. Some habitat was flooded and filled with silt and ash. Once mossy ponds were now gravel and ash". Southern Cross University Publication, July 2020.

The most recent environmental report card on Victoria, the "State of The Environment" analysis published in 2019, found the state's environment was in worsening health in 51 of 170 categories. The devastating summer bushfires likely worsened the trend further.

The Bureau of Meteorology has said that our country is heating more rapidly than the global average. The hot and dry conditions behind the summer bushfires would be eight times more likely if global heating reaches 2'c. Worse, the bureau says we are headed for a 4'c rise in the next 80 years.

The toll on our communities and wildlife will be catastrophic.

Clearly, we must protect and replenish natural habitats as a matter of urgency.

The response to the wildlife victims of the fires of 2019/20 were entirely underwhelming. The miniscule level of rescue and feeding measures which were eventually deployed in Victoria in 2020 is appalling, particularly when one considers the millions of dollars donated by members of the public locally and abroad specifically for this reason. It is believed a mere 350 animals were rescued from public lands including state and national parks; 75% of them koalas. Yet in NSW and Vic, 1.2 billion animals died.

Threats – The Enemy Within?

It is clear what needs to be done, to safeguard our communities. But we need our elected leaders to get it done.

Unfortunately policy makers appear too often influenced by industry groups and conflicts of interests.

“Australia is being held back by the self-interest of a few right wing politicians and a network of influential companies, particularly in the fossil fuels industry, who are prepared to sacrifice other people’s health and wellbeing for their own short term economic gain”. news.com.au September 2018

Our group has witnessed this directly.

Prevention better than cure – A Change in thinking.

While farmers rely on climate, It is a well-known fact that livestock farming and land clearing directly contribute to climate change and hence fire dangers. Livestock farming poses a double climate threat, driving the loss of forests to make way for grazing land and generating huge amounts of methane which is 25 times more potent than co2.

Meanwhile, a comprehensive study led by Anthony Waldron of Oxford University and 100 other experts published July 2020, shows the value of protecting 30% of the earth by 2030 socially and economically. *“The financial and economic benefits of protecting 30 percent of the planet exceed its costs by a factor of 5 to 1. “*

Costa Rica for example, has doubled the size of its forest cover and at the same time tripled its economic growth in 30 years.

Recommendations

- State government to be held accountable for 30% of our natural forests and wetlands to be protected by 2030 and 50% by 2050 (currently 11%).
- Council / planning approvals to ensure “nature has half”.
- Landowners to be incentivized to maintain tree cover / natural habitat and to minimize clearing.
- “New Ag” industries to be supported which do not require land clearing or significant water use, including but not limited to, hemp production, nature based tourism and “re-wilding”.
- Consumer tariffs to be imposed on high “environmental cost” products (landclearing and water use).
- Development of new industries such as “reforestation” of natural forests (as opposed to plantations), “clean meat” which will help to feed millions more people in future, “vertical gardens” and “roof top gardens” for localized fruit and vegetable growing.
- Encouragement of higher use of public transport, to be more in line with other countries.
- Changes to the tax system so that energy taxes reflect the climate cost associated with fuel use. Fire- fighting costs and biodiversity solutions to be subsidised by high emitters.
- Redeployment of loggers to firefighting, leveraging their valuable understanding of forests and excavating skills.
- Redeployment of miners to reforestation or green infrastructure (see below).
- “Green infrastructure” - a term for nature based structures capturing stormwater underground and in wetlands, is gaining popularity as a solution to worsening droughts and floods. It could be a significant source of regional jobs.
- Incentivise landowners to hold fire-fighting equipment on their properties.
- Water bores to be placed in state and national parks connected to remotely operated sprinkler systems. (This measure will also assist with water provision for wildlife and help to keep wildlife away from roads or farms where it may not be welcome. It may also help to cool heat stressed wildlife like the thousands of flying foxes that died in a matter of days in one Victorian park in December 2019.)
- Deploy prompt large scale responses at the first signs of fire including immediate deployment of large scale firebombing - state and federal - to prevent fires growing large and uncontrollable.



Brad Fleet's heartbreaking image of a juvenile kangaroo caught in a fence trying to escape a fire on Kangaroo Island.

- Incentivise landowners to remove unnecessary fencing, to ensure wildlife “corridors” and to open gates if fire approaches to allow animals to flee.
- Technology such as drones to proactively identify populations of animals ill equipped to escape fire such as koalas, with a view to deploying fire-fighting efforts and wildlife rescue teams to the area early.
- Immediate permission for and deployment of wildlife rescue and feeding teams. If the areas are safe enough for government officials, they are safe enough for experienced vets and wildlife carers.
- All policy makers and panels to have their interests carefully scrutinized and those with any real or potential conflicts, removed entirely from the process.

In Closing

Australian governments were warned of the increasing fire risks more than a decade ago. In 2007, Professor Ross Garnaut was commissioned by Australia’s Commonwealth State and Territory Governments to complete an independent study into the impact of climate change on the Australian economy.

The Garnaut Climate Change Review was published in September 2018. It predicted fire seasons would start earlier, finish later, and be more intense. It said this would be directly observable in 2020.

Governments’ failure to act accordingly, has cost lives of people, of billions of animals, irreversible damage to ecosystems and trust in governments themselves.

Will they act now?

This critical issue deserves the utmost prioritization of urgent funding, action and change.

In January 2020, the United Nations warned we have just 10 years to save Earth's biodiversity and remaining wildlife or face severe consequences for human survival.

Globally, more than a million species are now faced with extinction, three quarters of the Earth's land has been significantly altered because of exploitation of our natural assets, shrinking of habitat, climate change and pollution.

Australia and Victoria, are stand-out culprits.

Many Victorians, particularly regional, have a deep love and connection to our natural environment. It is often the very reason we choose to live in regional Victoria.

To witness it being degraded, undervalued and mismanaged by elected governments is more than heartbreaking. It is utterly depressing and terrifying.

Those of us who experienced the horrifying inferno and the resultant "dead zones" are forever affected, dreading the next summer and the next. Those who escaped the latest infernos and can still enjoy our wildlife today, live in fear of tomorrow.

Aside from the inevitable adverse impact on regional tourism if this trend of destruction continues, if we want to have a livable regional Victoria, the Victorian government must make urgent change now *and* be held accountable to tomorrow.

Life depends on it.

There is simply nothing more urgent or important.

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