

My name is Andrew Parsons and I am a retiree. I live in the [REDACTED], where according to the mayor, people like to live because it is leafy and green. We are lucky enough to see the iconic tree covered Dandenong Ranges from our home and so I have to agree with her. These hills form part of the Great Dividing Range which runs all the way up the east coast of Australia to the tip of our great continent.

I have decided to make my submission not just because I have a vested interest in the aesthetic appeal of this natural environment and the native species that exist within it but also because I know that they are progressively coming under more frequent and impacting threats from a range of sources. The recent devastating June storms close to us here have come on top of the incredibly destructive and wide ranging summer fires of 2020. To me these are simply reminders of the challenges and threats that the scientists say are going to be repeated in future. We have to take action now and go hard.

All steps to further embed protection for our native wildlife and its habitat, such as this review of the Wildlife Act, are to be applauded. This review is an important part of the action we need to urgently take so as to protect our native wildlife.

I trust that my submission will in some way contribute to what should culminate in the most effective protection possible given to our native wildlife species.

I have made my points under the following headings;

Transparency and Accountability

- The Authority to Control Wildlife System needs to be reformed so that clear principles are followed and so that there is far greater transparency, monitoring and enforcement, which actually protects native wildlife, not just regulating killing.
- Currently the highly non-transparent Authority to Control Wildlife permit system allows for the destruction of a plethora of native wildlife. This murky “Authority to Control Wildlife” permit system has seen, in the last 10 years, permits issued for close to 100 different animals – including Wombats, Emus, Australian Fur Seals, Satin Bowerbirds and Black Swans. It’s unclear if these permits were for lethal or non-lethal control and disturbingly, permits to “control” threatened wildlife (such as the Brolga, Grey-headed Flying Fox, Hardhead, Magpie Goose, Broad-shelled Turtle and the Murray River Turtle) have also been granted.

Clarification

- Protections for exotic invasive species like deer need to be removed. A Senate inquiry has called on all states to register deer as a pest species – it's definitely time to unprotect the estimated 1 million deer stomping and chomping across Victoria.

In a recent trip to Croajingalong National Park in east Gippsland just prior to the 2020 fires I witnessed considerable damage caused by Samba deer. Their habit of creating bogs in fresh water creeks has resulted in a complete and destructive change to fragile ecosystems along this part of the coastline. We saw deer wondering amongst the heathland vegetation and their footprints along the beach and in the sand dunes were visible every new day.

- The Act needs to increase protections for wildlife and wildlife habitat by providing new tools such as “wildlife protection zones” and “wildlife protection orders” and by upgrading to legislation the current regulation that a person is “not to damage, disturb or destroy any wildlife habitat”.
- All native wildlife should be defined and protected as native wildlife, including our native ducks and quails, currently open for recreational hunting.

I have witnessed the destructive forces of duck hunting and heard the comments of hunters referring to incidents describing the killing of protected species by irresponsible hunters.

The decline in water birds due to drought and habitat loss is well documented and reason enough to put a ban on duck hunting.

- Currently the Act allows wildlife to be declared as unprotected which, at one stage, had the perverse outcome of wombat shooting being promoted as a tourist attraction.

My brother lives in the Murrindindi Shire in Victoria close to a well-publicised activity which was abhorrent. A nearby property owner/company was host to overseas visitors who were escorted into the area with the sole purpose of shooting wombats.

Penalties

- To increase deterrence there should be a dramatic increase in penalties, including prison.
- When it comes to actually prosecuting illegal acts of harm to wildlife such as in the appalling incidents of the illegal poisoning of Wedge-tailed Eagles and the bulldozing of koalas which met with little to no penalties, the Act appears toothless.

Independence in decision making

- An independent statutory regulator should be established to enforce the Act.

Habitat Protection

- The Wildlife Act 1975 claims to promote the protection and conservation of wildlife.
- The failure of it and other environmental protection legislation (e.g. EPBC Act) to limit damage to wildlife habitat is well established. Logging exemptions result in the ongoing loss of wildlife habitat which has been recognised recently in court judgments (VicForests VS Leadbeater's Possum). In this case habitat loss for this wildlife species was not disputed.
- The permission to grant logging exemptions in east Gippsland forests after the devastating summer fires is another example of the lack of protection and conservation potential for wildlife.
- I also fail to see how this logging could be deemed 'in the public interest' when it has been so widely condemned by the broader public.
- To address this state of affairs, under the Wildlife Act 1975 native timber harvesting operations should not be exempted from damaging, disturbing or destroying wildlife habitat.

Duty of Care

- The idea of a "general duty of care" should be supported – a duty to "avoid harm" to wildlife could help to minimize incidences of wildlife being treated as collateral damage.

The rights and interests of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians

- I am not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent. Yes I deserve the right to be heard, but my opinion should not receive the same degree of consideration in matters related to the rights and interests of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians under the Act.
- If it is true that the Act doesn't appear to appropriately recognise the rights and interests of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians then it is time for that to be addressed. Those in the best position to advise the Panel on how to do this will be the Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians.
- The principle of self-determination should be adhered to and therefore in my opinion it is right and proper that their voice should be prioritised.

Conclusion

I have three grandchildren who are all less than eight years of age. Like a lot of kids who live in Australia they often bring up native animals in conversation and good on them

for that. It is only natural, considering the special place that these animals have in the story that is Australia. A story that is recognised worldwide.

Sadly however it is also a story that is constantly being tarnished by a picture of loss. Whether it be an image of a koala with burnt paws wrapped in cloth, wombats shot, poisoned eagles lying prostrate on a farm property, dead fish suffocated from choked rivers or the invisible loss of species as their habitat is destroyed by fire or unnecessary logging in native forests, it is now becoming the story of wildlife species lost and disappearing.

Unless strong action is taken on a range of fronts to protect their habitat and the animals directly, my grandchildren will continue to see more species loss throughout their lifetime. It will then be a vastly different story from the happy one that currently comes with cute words and phrases.

This tragedy must be stalled and an effective review of the Wildlife Act focussed on greater protection for our wildlife and their habitat, in my opinion, is absolutely vital.

Thank you for the opportunity of having my say.

Andrew Parsons