

## **The Independent Review of Victoria's Wildlife Act**

### **Reason for Submission**

As an academic working in the field of Animal Studies, who has published a book on the cultural history of bats (*Bat*, London: Reaktion, 2018), I am concerned with issues around animal welfare and in particular Australian wildlife, especially our vulnerable flying foxes. Clearly the Wildlife Act 1975 needs updating and attention. The Act does not address the current situation with Australian wildlife or changing social attitudes and values in relation to Australian wildlife. There have been several recent incidents that have propelled me to write this submission.

### **Traditional Owners**

First Nations people have lived and prospered in Australia for millennia. They have developed complex cultural understandings of wildlife and habitat. The Wildlife Act is a great opportunity to develop contemporary legislation that reflects and respects First Nations knowledge. This is an opportunity to practice a genuine Acknowledgement of Country by giving traditional custodians greater powers in terms of wildlife management, respect and appreciation.

### **Wedgetail Eagles**

In 2018 four hundred Wedgetail Eagles were killed in rural Victoria by a farmer. The farmer injected insecticide into lamb carcasses and poisoned these animals, sacred to the Kulin Nations of Victoria. The punishment for this unprecedented killing of a native species was minimal and laughable. The farmworker who was just "following orders" was fined \$25,000 and jailed for two weeks. The land-owner paid \$25,000 and received a 12-month community correction order with 100 hours of unpaid community work. There was a public outcry and many people felt that the punishment was grossly inadequate.

The Wildlife Act needs to address this sort of action and should put into place strong deterrents against killing or harming Australian wildlife. This farmer should have been made accountable, and particularly he should have been made accountable to the Kulin Nations for desecrating their creator spirit Bunjil, who travels as a Wedgetail Eagle.

### **Habitat Loss through Logging**

The ancient old-growth forests of Victoria are home to vast numbers of animals and plants found nowhere else on Earth. These rare rainforests are spectacular relics of Gondwana, yet many have been earmarked for logging by VicForests. Many scientists have attested that the biodiversity of these forests is vital to the health of the country and many birds and animals will be driven to extinction without these forests, for example the Leadbeater's Possum, and the Greater Glider.

The Wildlife Act must not exempt timber harvesting and logging from the legislation. These forests are essential habitat for animals and must be protected. There must be accountability for damage and destruction of wildlife habitat.

### **Flying Foxes**

Grey-headed Flying Foxes are listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species. Nevertheless, these animals are often treated as pests. In early 2020 there were reports of bats being shot and bashed for eating fruit in people's gardens. They are frequently tangled in netting and left to die. More state-wide education on netting fruit trees correctly, or subsidising the correct netting, fining those without correct netting, and prosecuting anyone deliberately hurting these animals, must be systematic and thorough. In the meantime, existing roost sites must be managed by professional teams, particularly in relation to heat stress events. Many of the roost sites in Victoria have this care and attention but many don't, and it is up to the individual councils to respond to the situation. We need a state-wide Grey-headed Flying Fox policy run by a team of experts who genuinely care about saving these creatures as we head into ever-hotter temperatures. We will need to educate all Victorians how to best care for these vulnerable animals.

### **Native Water Birds**

The current Wildlife Act treats native water birds and native quail as mere targets for recreational shooters.

This year the Kingsford Study found waterbirds had dropped 23% bringing Eastern Australia's total waterbird loss to 90% in the past four decades! During duck shooting season threatened species are shot every year, even birds such as Black Swans, Crested Terns and Freckled Ducks, all of which are supposedly illegal to shoot. Most shooters cannot even identify what they are shooting.

The Game Management Authority is the supposedly independent body that oversees duck shooting every year. However, it is not perceived as independent by most people involved with Australian water birds. In fact, the GMA is perceived as part of the shooters culture where many of the staff have held licenses and believe it is their right to shoot native and endangered wildlife.

There is no social license for this blood sport, with the vast majority of Victorians both urban and rural are opposed to it. No native wildlife should be hunted.

### **Community Attitudes and Values**

There has been an enormous shift in community values toward Australian wildlife since 1975. There is greater understanding of the intrinsic value of our native wildlife and environment. And there has grown a greater respect for Indigenous Australians and their complex knowledge of wildlife and habitat. This needs to be reflected in the Wildlife Act.

There is also a greater understanding of global warming and the human effects that are causing climate change and damaging the environment. There is a range of human activities that are having a detrimental effect on our climate, environment and our wildlife and they need to be addressed in the Wildlife Act.

The current Wildlife Act from 1975 needs updating. First, it should be retitled the **Native Wildlife Act** and should protect ALL native vertebrate fauna. It needs to have clear principles that are followed with greater transparency and monitoring.

- the Act should guarantee the protection of species of cultural significance to Traditional Owners.
- the Act should ensure populations of native wildlife have sufficient population size, diversity and suitable habitat to maintain or improve the capacity of species to persist and evolve in the wild.
- the Act needs to increase protections for wildlife and wildlife habitat by providing new tools such as “wildlife protection zones” and “wildlife protection orders”
- the Act should upgrade to legislate the current regulation that a person is “not to damage, disturb or destroy any wildlife habitat.”
- the Act should ensure adequate monitoring of native wildlife populations and habitats.
- An independent statutory regulator should be established to enforce, monitor and report on the administration of the Act.