

SUBMISSION

The INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF VICTORIA'S WILDLIFE ACT

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From

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[REDACTED]

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Thank you for this opportunity.

My name is Karen Alexander [REDACTED]
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I trained as an ecologist, have a Masters in Social Ecology, and work, paid and unpaid, in numerous organisations, including as Chair of Bush Heritage Australia, Campaigns Director, Australian Conservation Foundation. I co-founded numerous organisations including the local landcare group and the local landcare network.

Below are four of my examples that point to the need for reform of the Wildlife Act. The recommendations, I have discovered, mirror some of those from the Victorian National Parks Association but I came to the recommendations via my own experiences as written about below.

1. Changing attitudes to land, habitat and wildlife

Over 100 years ago my grandfather cleared much of the land on which I now live. It was what you did then, and he farmed it.

I have spent almost 30 years addressing this - thus illustrating the changing attitudes to 'land', 'habitat' and 'wildlife'. What was a gain from his perspective, I felt as a loss. I have worked hard to address this loss aiming to 'restore' some of the conservation values of the 10 hectares.

This region [REDACTED] - has changed in the 35 years we have lived here from commercial farming to hobby 'farms'. In our valley there are now only three economically viable farms - they are small and intensive: bulbs, cut flowers, and wholesale plant nursery. The rest is either hobby farmed with one of three main management regimes:

- i) Land managed for grazing with some agricultural weed management but little management for conservation;
- ii) land not managed even for weeds of national significance such as ragwort and blackberry, often naturally 'regenerating' (from neglect, not purposeful decision) - a mix of weeds and, usually, silver wattle;
- iii) being actively managed for conservation values usually via revegetation with largely native (not necessarily indigenous) species.

The economics of farming has changed the relationship with wildlife from, in my observation, seen as pest (shooting of wallaby/kangaroo/wombat), to benign neglect (just let them be) or

to huge appreciation of their presence: there is excitement when an eagle is swooping low over the town, or a lyrebird is heard in Emerald Lake Park.

2. Successful government and individual investment to 'restore' a natural area but no teeth to protect it even with covenant.

My work on grandfather's cleared land has included allowing natural regeneration in the areas that still had some very old and large eucalypts, and replanting the rest.

It has taken thousands of hours of work and Melbourne Water Stream Frontage grants. This tax-payer investment of \$1000pa (average over 20 years) aimed at improving the health of the waterway and the catchment, has, on my calculations, leveraged six times this amount in my labour and funds. The outcome: a much healthier waterway with riparian vegetation 100 metres wide over 500 metres long.; not only appreciated by us but it is also a 'community good'.

Seven of the 10 hectares is now covenanted with Trust for Nature.

But, it is being destroyed by deer.

Foxes, cats, and weeds can be managed. But not deer. They leap fences, they break and eat plants, they trample, and these are only small fallow deer now moving onto the property. Only two kilometres away is Cardinia Dam where there are, at last count that I know of three years ago, 600 sambar deer. The big ones.

The Wildlife Act, 1975, protects these animals. The state government's Deer Strategy is doing nothing to reduce them in our area. The work that is happening is being driven by community groups and individuals with some government grants (so one-offs most of the time).

RECOMMENDATION:

Protections for exotic invasive species like feral deer need to be removed. Victoria is the last mainland state to have deer as a protected species; it must be registered as a pest species. They should also be listed as a pest species under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994. This helps drive a strategy to remove a pest, not manage a game animal.

3. What else was here just 20 years ago? Do we have to just lose, lose, lose?

Evidence of bandicoots – probably long-nosed - was seen near wood piles on the northern edge of my grandfather's original 100 acres. They are very important soil engineers aerating the soils, getting oxygen to the microflora and fauna that then gobble up the litter (very good for fuel reduction). For years I have kept an eye out for them, watching for tracks in the mud along the creek, or conical holes in the ground. I've planted vegetation that should protect them from nosey cats and foxes.

There is no legislation that I can see where this loss can even be acknowledged let alone requiring some action to address the loss, or at least consider if there can be action.

If the area is in a growth corridor it's not likely bandicoots will survive but this area is hobby farming country, with approximately 20% native vegetation cover and bandicoots should be here as part of the system. They are locals too. A Wildlife Act should address this.

What else was here that one might expect to be protected by a Wildlife Act? Eels and frogs for instance. Old ████████ an Italian who lived up the creek and loved his chestnuts and pigs would

tell me about the sound of the frogs – and the eels - along the creek when he first came farming here after WWII.

“So noisy Karen! You couldn’t hear yourself think with the frogs. You may not like this but the eels were delicious. So sad now.” A wistful look on his face as he sipped his very strong coffee complete with grappa (at 10am).

Where is this loss of species acknowledged? What action can be taken? Does it have to be inevitable that we gradually lose, lose, lose. Till when?

Last one: lyrebirds would have roamed this tall wet forest landscape. Last year about this time was the first time we’ve seen one here – or any local has seen one - in all the 30 plus years that we’ve been here. Our revegetation and our neighbours’ reveg will have helped for sure. But again, is there no legislation where this can be reported and there is obligation to acknowledge and build on this hopeful trend?

RECOMMENDATION

- The Wildlife Act 1975 should be titled the Native Wildlife Act and should properly protect all native vertebrate fauna.
- It should ensure that 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 should ensure adequate monitoring of native wildlife populations and habitats, particularly those of threatened species, species likely to be in decline.

4. Given the climate crisis that is on top of the nature crisis in Victoria (most heavily cleared state, etc etc)

What case could there possibly be for any native wildlife species to be ‘unprotected’? They belong here. We need to live with them. And I suspect we’re clever enough to do that without unprotecting them and allowing them to be killed (which is hardly ‘living’ with them).

RECOMMENDATION

- The ability to declare any native wildlife species as “unprotected” should be removed.