

Submission to the Independent Review of Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975

Submission date: 30/06/2021

Nillumbik Friends of the Great Forest are calling for an urgent overhaul of Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 which no longer meets the needs of native wildlife in Victoria, contemporary community expectations, or the Act's own guiding principles.

Native wildlife vs feral animals

One obvious problem is the lumping together of native fauna with introduced species under the heading "Wildlife". This makes it easy to speak casually of "culling" kangaroos and even wombats and the "sport" of shooting native water birds whilst invasive feral species such as deer are often protected. Native fauna needs protection. Introduced species need controlling.

Native Wildlife

Many species of native wildlife are heading for extinction in Victoria. This tells us that the Act is not working according to two of its key purposes: "*the protection and conservation of wildlife*", and "*the prevention of taxa of wildlife from becoming extinct*".

The Act should be redesigned to actually protect our native wildlife and their habitat. Currently the Wildlife Act and the 'Authority to Control Wildlife' system (poorly) regulates the killing of our native birds and animals as opposed to protecting them.

Native forest logging

Loss of habitat is one of the main threats, perhaps *the* main threat, to the continued survival of our beloved wildlife. Many threatened species rely on mature forests, including the Greater Glider, Yellow Bellied Glider, Leadbeater's Possum, Sooty Owl, Smoky Mouse, and Spotted-tail Quoll. The current Act provides no direct protection for wildlife habitat.

The exemption from the EPBC Act, which is provided to the native forest logging industry via the RFAs, enables logging operations to impact severely on wildlife and wildlife habitat with impunity. This exemption is clearly incompatible with the survival of threatened species. Threatened and endangered species lists will continue to grow without urgent action.

For example, the [Threatened Species Scientific Committee](#) advised the Federal government on the listing of the Greater Glider as threatened. The Minister approved this conservation advice on 02/05/2016 and included this species in the Vulnerable category. The [advice](#) was that "*Over the period 1997–2010, the greater glider declined by an average of 8.8 percent per year (a rate that*

if extrapolated over the 22 year period relevant to this assessment is 87 percent.)" (Lindenmayer et al., 2011). Higher rates of decline were recorded in forests subject to logging than in conservation reserves, and declines were also associated with major bushfires and lower-than-average rainfall. More recent surveys undertaken by Lumsden et al. (2013, p. 3) stated: "A striking result from these surveys was the scarcity of the Greater Glider which was, until recently, common across the Central Highlands". A review considering uplisting the Greater Glider to "Endangered" is currently underway. Yet their habitat is still destroyed by logging and the Office of the Conservation Regulator seems unable or unwilling to prevent this.

We need clear laws that prohibit damaging, disturbing or destroying wildlife habitat, and native timber harvesting operations should be held accountable to these laws.

Introduced species in the wild / feral animals

Protections for exotic species need to be removed from the Act. Exotic species are causing immense damage to habitat needed by native wildlife, including our forests. The sambar deer is one example of an exotic species that causes damage yet receives protection under the current act. Deer spread weed seeds through our forests and have been shown to reduce vegetation cover, tree regeneration, plant biomass, sapling growth and plant species diversity. *"Further, a study comparing vegetation at locations with high (>20 deer km⁻²) and low (<10 deer km⁻²) densities of rusa deer suggested that they reduce understorey plant diversity"*.¹ A Senate inquiry has called on all states to register deer as a pest species. The estimated million deer in Victoria should have their protection removed.

Currently the regulator of the Act, the Office of the Conservation Regulator, lacks independence as it functions as an administrative unit within DELWP. This status limits, if not undermines, the OCR's legal and apparent independence. For example, the OCR is vulnerable to future changes in policy. The Authority to Control Wildlife System requires far greater transparency, monitoring, enforcement and much more severe penalties. The approximately \$6 per eagle penalty given to the person who killed all the Wedge Tail Eagles in Gippsland was little more than a slap on the wrist.

Prescribed Burning

Another threat to habitat that needs to be addressed is prescribed burning. It is almost inevitable that these fires have a negative impact on wildlife, but it is not at all clear that they achieve their intended purpose.

¹ **A systematic review of the impacts and management of introduced deer (family Cervidae) in Australia.** Davis et al. *Wildlife Research* 43(6), 26 October 2016. <https://www.publish.csiro.au/WR/fulltext/WR16148>

In research referred to in the [Guardian last year](#) "*The University of Melbourne desktop analysis used Rural Fire Service data to compare the size and severity of this season's bushfires area with hazard reduction burns over the past five years. The majority of the area in which there had been prescribed burning had been razed again by bushfire in the past three months. Patrick Baker, a professor of silviculture and forest ecology, said the prescribed burning did not "seem to have done much at all" in areas that faced a crowning bushfire that burned the canopy.*"

And as Professor David Lindenmayer puts it, "*The effectiveness of fuel reduction burning is hugely reduced on these very hot days. The peer-reviewed evidence is that **burning** forest miles from houses doesn't protect those houses.*" 15 Mar 2021

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